



JOHN AND JENNY
DENNIS



BLOOD, SWEAT, TEARS AND COAL



L'INSOMNIAQUE

JOHN & JENNY DENNIS

BLOOD, SWEAT, TEARS AND COAL

*Insights on the Great Miners' Strike
of 1984-85*

L'insomniaque

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NATIONAL UNION OF MINERS
YORKSHIRE AREA

WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE.

NORTH CAWBER BRANCH

14th July 1984: Yorkshire miners demonstrate
in the streets of Wakefield.

– FOREWORD –
*Blood, sweat and tears,
but not only...*

WHEN we started this book with John Dennis, it was meant to be different. Then he died in May 2002, and the initial plan changed completely. Now it's not just by John, it's about him, a personal tribute by a few friends and people close to him. But it's a little more, too, because sometimes personal affairs are really everyone's. These are bittersweet recollections by his wife Jenny, who was also his closest accomplice in struggle. The two of them formed what she called the "A-team".

Who was John Dennis, formerly a South Yorkshire miner, a friend met during the strike about which this book was written? Why did he die?

I go ape is a song that has the kind of pop music lyrics John liked to play around with. He could strum a Mississippi blues on his guitar or switch to a good old rock 'n roll tune on the piano. But he might just as likely pause to tell a story. About the tree we were sitting under or a bird who'd just landed on one of its branches. John, the miner who emerged from the depths of the pitface, could tell

you more about his region's fauna and flora than an encyclopedia. And it wasn't a hobby. He was passionately curious about surrounding nature. Life and living beings were what interested him most, and what he hated most was any kind of domestication or hierarchy, whether the State, the bosses or the union. He despised money and the way it was taking control over the entire world. (He even left the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds after writing to criticize its commercialism.)

He imagined and fought for a cashless, classless world, but seized life's pleasures where he could find them. Although an idealist, he kept his two feet planted firmly on the ground. He could go on for hours about the social memory of his area, country or even the world, a rebel who knew his history and who his brothers were – the working class¹. He could draw on an endless store of incisive anecdotes, funny or tragic, his own and those of others. They would be interspersed with folk and protest songs and a swig of beer, wine or liquor of some sort, homemade or store-bought. Always a glass in his hand, another in yours, and he never forgot to fill them. Right up to the end, despite or perhaps because of his illness, without ever letting up for a moment. As his son Matt says, he committed suicide gradually. Although alcohol was surely what finished him off, that wasn't what killed him. It all began much earlier ...

Jack London defined his vision of the strikebreaker in a short, biting essay called "The Scab", circulated widely in Great Britain during the famous miners' strike of 1984 and 1985. It perfectly describes the kind of individual the strikers were fighting against, more animal than man (John would probably bawl me out, saying that even for rattlesnakes, toads or vampires, it was insulting to compare them with scabs). The essay contrasts them to the kinds of people and values behind

what was not just a strike but a full-fledged battle between two world views, in which John had clearly chosen his side.

After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, the vampire, He had some awful substance left with which He made a scab.

A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water-logged brain, a combination backbone made of jelly and glue.

Where others have hearts he carries a tumor of rotten principle. When a scab comes down the street men turn their backs and angels weep in Heaven, and the devil shuts the gates of Hell to keep him out. No man has a right to scab so long as there is a pool of water to drown his body in, or a rope long enough to hang his carcass with.

Judas Iscariot was a gentleman compared with a scab. For betraying his Master he had character enough to hang himself – a scab has not. Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Judas Iscariot sold his Savior for 30 pieces of silver.

The modern strikebreaker sells his birthright, his country, his wife, his children, and his fellow man for an unfilled promise from his employer, trust or corporation. Esau was a traitor to himself. Judas Iscariot was a traitor to his God. [...] A strike-breaker to his God, his country, his family, his class. A real man will never scab.

John was what you might, without any male chauvinist or other connotation, call a real man. He was so gentle and affectionate, with his family, friends and colleagues of course, but also with others he didn't even know. He was unusually open and enjoyed meeting people. Not that he was always easygoing, but he directed

his anger against those who deserved it. His outbursts of fury left some superb, indelible traces in the course of the strike, even when they were tempered by a level head.

And he was certainly not alone. Most of the clichés about English prols, miners in particular, should be dumped on the scrap heap of their dark history. And indeed, the stereotyped portrayals found in certain species of literature, movies and media should meet a similar fate. The caricatural “real man, tough guy flexing his tattooed biceps” is the aesthetic counterpart of the ideological workerist mythology of the “worker aristocracy.” This is a two-faced myth: on one side are the working class heroes, vanguard of an idealized class fighting epic battles; on the other, a legitimate feeling of dignity is fed by flattery to make one of the hardest jobs around not only palatable but, at times, proudly embraced. People who spent time with the miners know that those who conveyed such images were mostly just showing off and that, scratching the surface, any trace would generally disappear quite quickly. Quicker, in fact, than elsewhere because this long strike, in which women played a more vital, massive role than ever before in a British labor conflict, left profound changes, affecting even interpersonal relationships and mores.

The term “real man,” then, is to be taken in the original, generic sense at a time when humans first began naming themselves: “Inuits,” “Gypsies,” “Tojols,” “Imazighen” and a hundred others all translate into “men,” “real men” or even “free men.”

These correspondences are not accidental. In fact, two worldviews clashed during the strike which, to simplify, could be ascribed one to the strikebreaker and the other to the striker. The scab is the paradigm of the solitary, egotistical individual intentionally generated by

commodity society. Thatcher briefly became the English heroine extolling a social model in which the scab is the universal hero who puts his individual interests above collective interests. The striker, who embodies absolutely opposing values, is the real man. He is a subject linked to his peers by a shared sense of belonging, intimately meshed with the common interest. A free subject, he belongs to a community fighting to defend itself against a world intent on wiping out those communities or dissolving them in a “global village.” This is a deadly, abstract world, peopled with atomized beings who can only interrelate through money. In Great Britain back in those years, the “global village” swallowed up hundreds of very real village communities.

Which side are you on?

A QUESTION often heard during the strike. And when strikers asked it of anyone with a dubious attitude towards the strike – not just scabs but certain union officials and other politicos – it sounded more like a threat. It was a sharp reminder that in times of war – and this was one – everyone has to publicly choose sides.

The demarcation line in the war between these two worldviews, both physically and symbolically, was the picket line. Those who crossed it entered the opposing camp, an act of betrayal even more definitive in Great Britain than anywhere else. For the British proletariat, “Never cross a picket line” is an inviolable watchword. First of all, it is a practical injunction on which the strikers’ strength depends, aimed at maintaining unity within each of their village communities, their unity generally, and, more vital still, the mythical unity of the working class. Every scab is not just another lost ally but a wedge driven in by the enemy to split that unity, which then has to be rebuilt. That explains the strikers’ constant efforts

to bring scabs back into the ranks, starting by discussion (backed, if need be, by material aid for those who had returned to work out of dire necessity) but, when no other choice is left, by “persuasion.” However, “never cross a picket line” is also, and perhaps more importantly, a moral injunction not to commit what amounts to sacrilege for real men. These values are not to be taken lightly. Back in 1984, you could still come across lonely old men shunned by all and not arousing the slightest pity. They were the surviving scabs from the 1926 strike! Being quarantined in those villages amounts to social death: once a scab, always a scab.

Thus two conceptions of freedom clash. For the ruling class, it is freedom to conduct business, to work, to consume. George Orwell summed up these paradoxes in his famous “Freedom is slavery.” Being free of others to advance one's own mug is the prerequisite to buying and selling oneself. At the other extreme is the strikers' conception of freedom as a community of individuals with one another. The community is a territory that has been liberated, ripped from the hands of business and government slave drivers. Understandably, one of the first measures taken in Thatcher's antisocial legislation was to impose a secret ballot before industrial action is launched. The aim was to make voting a sneaky, solitary act in a perfectly controlled atmosphere, the isolation of a voting booth, as opposed to open public debate resolved, failing consensus, by a straightforward, collective show of hands. Proudly and unashamedly, like a striking miner in Yorkshire. Like John Dennis.

The strike radicalized the two camps and very quickly revealed its true nature as a war between two positions so irreconcilable that one had to obliterate the other. Nothing less than the economy itself was at stake. On one side lined up the natural defenders of the econ-

omy, the ruling class which manages and profits from it, wielding the State's arms (the law, police, army and other forces) and the power of money. On the other were the resisting strikers and their countless allies, people full of courage whose motivation was generosity and above all solidarity. This camp's weapons were the united qualities of all of its members. The war was an ancient one, pitting the human spirit against economics.

The strikers didn't give a damn about the economy's reasons. The purported sacrosanct respect for the machine took a real knocking, if we judge from the countless acts of sabotage by striker commandos. These "hit squads," whether for tactical reasons or simply out of revenge, but in keeping with a tradition in Britain (Captain Swing's hay-rick torching peasants, Luddite workers destroying the first industrial mills, or youthful rioters and hooligans vandalizing the badges of their urban hell), ransacked, burned and wrecked National Coal Board equipment and offices, as well as a police station. Cut cables, sabotaged machines, security systems shut down, and even some pits rendered inoperable by flooding, and meanwhile the miners continued to strike against the pit closures!

Planners who thought they'd bought themselves industrial peace with the "high" miners' wages came up against the same iconoclasm. The money, which was meant to integrate the miners through access to greater comfort and consumption, didn't succeed any more than the goods it bought in turning them more middleclass. In actuality, they began selling off the video players, TVs, cars and the rest, somewhat reluctantly but, after all, you had to eat, and it was more important to keep the struggle going. Even as the British State counted on wearing the strikers down economically, the movement was inventing a life largely free of economic constraints.

The miners gave every minute of their time, reasoning on the picket lines that “if we don’t sleep for just two hours a night now, later on we’ll be spending fifteen hours a day in bed, shut up in a room.” They put direct democracy into everyday practice, differently at each pit and sometimes even outside of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), holding many an electrifying mass meeting and experimenting collective reappropriation with singular inventiveness. Life in the minefields was literally transformed by the organized fund-raising and soup kitchens, distribution of food and coal, almost constantly occupied welfare clubs ², swapping and sharing, pooling of vehicles, preparation of actions, picket lines and flying pickets, not to mention parties, dances, sleepless nights, one-off or lifetime encounters. Many people, and not just miners, still talk about that period as the best in their lives. It belongs to them.

A few years ago, John told me about a brief episode in his own turbulent sixties. Actually, his entire existence was turbulent; he had tons of stories to tell ... and really knew how to tell them! I was especially moved by one, which happened to be true but, like a fairytale or legend, told volumes about work, money, back-stabbers and, above all, John and people of his caliber. A Pash-toun storyteller once said, “All legends describe a process through which an unstable, artificial order is destroyed to make way for a more sustainable order.” I really liked the story’s moral, and many of us would have dreamed of that “sustainable order” (or disorder), achievable solely by destroying the far too long-lived “artificial order” (or disorder). Several months later, John, who was also quite a writer, wrote this story, a gift so beautiful that we decided to turn it into a book. And then John left. But that’s another story ...

Before embarking on this journey, the reader should

be warned that it is sorrowful, one of furious storms, reefs and wrecks, pirates and sharks, fierce battles and bitter defeats, rotgut and endless hangovers. No peaceful cruise this, but an expedition from which there will be no turning back. Seasickness guaranteed, and blood, sweat and tears. But pleasure as well. For the journey is not merely that foul litany. The voyager weighed down by a sinister albatross will from time to time break free and soar to new heights. Or put in at welcoming harbors for long nights of discussion around fine ales, stouts or bitters. Then at daybreak, hands warmed over picket-line fires. There will be epic scrums in the land of rugby as thousands of warriors suddenly rise out of the murky depths to push through the line-up of fucking cop bastards and take revenge on those pigs and the scabs they protect. Their voices will join those of women and children, singing a tune so popular in the Isles that it became every rebel's refrain: "Harry Roberts ³ is our friend, is our friend... He killed coppers."

Bitter replays in Kiveton Park

JOHN, who throughout the conflict was among those who rose up and unified, ended up at the very center of the collapse, both literally and geographically. In the years after the strike, John, who never moved away from his village, Kiveton Park, found himself right smack in the middle of the ensuing process of disintegration. He and all those who like him had been at the forefront of every battle now looked on from the sidelines, helpless spectators of the horrific tragedy following defeat and what the future held in store for them. I returned to Kiveton Park several times over the intervening twenty years, and what I witnessed was each time worse than on the previous visit. For John who actually lived there...

Kiveton Park, a village in northeast England, in the South Yorkshire region a few miles from Sheffield, sprang up around its coalmines. It looked very much like hundreds of other pit villages, with the familiar contours of the mine's headframe, spoil heap and old Victorian-style buildings (the first pit at Kiveton was inaugurated in 1856). Small stores and pubs along main street and, running off it, a few dozen little streets bordered by miners' homes, rows of identical cottages by the hundreds, each with a minute flower garden in front and a slightly largely lot out back, often flowering as well and sometimes including a vegetable patch, barbecue, or whatever else could help those who spent their days plunged in pitch-black galleries forget their gray surroundings.

Despite basic similarities, each of the houses reflected individual tastes; you were easily drawn indoors by the instantaneous warmth—that of your host and of the coal burning in the fireplace or, increasingly, the fake coal fire glowing in the kitschy ersatz hearth. The difference wasn't important though, since the latter heats better and stinks less; only a genuine bobo would prefer the real McCoy under such conditions. As soon as you walked into a pub, you were immediately enveloped by the same kind of warmth and snug comfort. Partly it's the climate, Yorkshire having been, after all, the setting for *Wuthering Heights*. And when you felt that heat again in the welfares, it suddenly struck you very concretely just what made them clubs. Whether in a pub, welfare club or someone's house, you felt genuinely at home. And that warmth stuck with you as you trudged around the flickering flames of a picket-line fire in a wet and icy winter dawn.

In a few days and nights spent between pub and home, club and picket line, you began to understand, first of all

physically, the real nature of what the miners themselves called the “miners community”.⁴ This phrase was much debated, often trivially, but mostly politically and even sociologically. Opposing viewpoints fused, almost always colored by the speaker’s own perspective, as to whether that community did in fact exist, what it was in reality or abstractly and so on and so forth. But if you were there amid them all, you quickly realized that it was real and it was good, just like a fire.

During my last trip to Kiveton Park, in March 2003, I again experienced the warmth of being with my friends, but the flames of the struggle had long since died out, precisely because the miners themselves had disappeared. Worse still, the very memory of those struggles and the men and women who led them was fading. And the former mining village, now a well-to-do little town, was forgetting what it had been. Kiveton Park is about six miles from Sheffield, a big city with a strong industrial tradition and birthplace of global industry. After the slump of the 70s and 80s and the closures and relocations brought about by Thatcherite economics, Sheffield shifted to the service industries. However, despite or because of recent renovation and construction efforts designed to attract the middle class, this clientele preferred to flee the downtown area and even the entire city. Whereas in France the middle class tends to take over the city center, forcing its poorer residents out to ever-more distant suburbs, in England well-off people move as far as they can away from the dirt and pollution of the urban environment, but especially from its residents, who strike fear in their hearts.

Nowhere else as in England, and for centuries, has the middle class lived in such fear of the working class. That is where the modern system of domination –wage slavery– was born, so the English ruling class is well

aware of what it did and continues to do to the working class. Nicknamed King Mob, the latter fully deserved a reputation as potentially "dangerous" rioters or hooligans, but the fear generated is also rooted in the cowardice, delusions and guilty conscience of the ruling class. In 1984, rumor had it that organized gangs of strikers were holding up wealthy drivers along Yorkshire highways. True, what little was left of Sherwood Forest lay not far off, and the spirit of Robin Hood is still alive in many minds, but this was just another lie born of fear and promptly published by tabloids suffering similar delusions. This criminalization fuelled the fear of the "class enemy" that is so typically British.

Thus the middle class eagerly sought to escape cities like Sheffield. Kiveton Park was not only near, but quick to reach by train or on the expressway. In the minds of such people, the atmosphere was "healthier" since the mines closed: no more smog (but still fog), no more smoke or coal dust lingering in the air and settling on laundry you imprudently hung outdoors, no more blackened handkerchiefs when you coughed or blew your nose, no more lungs inflamed or scarred by silicosis. The black faces of miners, too, had disappeared or faded into the background, and the pubs, freed of the brawls, had at last become civilized. Kiveton proved to be an ideal site for housing subdivisions and, like thousands of similar places all over England and the Continent, destined to become a stereotype of "redevelopment," a dirty word hiding an even dirtier one, "gentrification." Two dirty words dissimulating the same reality – whole neighborhoods and villages erased along with their original residents to make room for others, built on a single model (varying slightly in appearance to reflect local color) and fostering a single way of life.

Kiveton Park was adapted to its new residents –or more appropriately “customers,” now that housing has become a consumer good– by building or renovating supermarkets, banks, services, shops and the other usual facilities. More strikingly, however, the landscape was in the process wiped clean of the village's real history, that of the miners. Who would have guessed that today's verdant, gently sloping contours were sculpted from a slag heap? The former mine's vast expanse, completely cleared, is now overrun by flowers and wild grass colonized by rare species of butterflies! All that is left of the tangle of mining structures are the former shower building pending redevelopment and a Victorian mansion, once the bosses' home, then National Coal Board office headquarters, and now housing various services and companies.

The only traces of Kiveton's past remaining in the village are two half colliery wheels plumped down as centerpieces on traffic circles. There is also the collection of miner's lamps, tools and artsy black-and-white photographs starring the mine and its miners that decorates the walls of one of the town's choicest establishments (a huge, luxurious hotel, restaurant and pub complex erected for the pleasure of Kiveton's new clientele). Its high-powered consumers no doubt find all of it very picturesque. It's like the “miner's revival” in English cinema in recent years. As someone once said, what disappears is replaced by its spectacle.

Canals along which barges laden with coal used to navigate crisscross the surrounding countryside. Like the sky, their waters have cleared since the pits were closed, and developers are planning a marina. Indeed, any number of similar schemes is in the pipeline for the environs, as in every other of Europe's old industrial

regions. This art of turning space to profit is what the specialists call “industrial zoning.” In the ongoing quest for maximum profit, tainted by a fair dose of guilt, the goal is to erase every trace of exploitation of man by man. To help urban planners, architects, banks and public authorities solve this dilemma, “creators” and “artists” craft plans in which “memorial sites” juxtapose business incubators. Industrial wastelands are redeveloped to house high-tech companies adjacent to mining museums, amid a Disneyland of exhibitions dedicated to working class-history, slag heaps-cum-ski slopes and artists’lofts. In short, social history can be made profitable, leaving everyone’s honor intact and generating new jobs to boot.

Indeed, the same economic considerations underpin all of the specific forms of a work-in-progress that could be described as global “Disneylandization”.⁵ Our is an era of pretence, substitution and representation. The moon’s green cheese has been selling for years. Now those who have the means can buy their lifestyle in a complete kit. Pros at reconstruction propose catalogues chock full of neighborhoods or even whole regions turned into “natural” or theme parks. For a cost, they sell not just houses but the accompanying lifestyles. In an alternative offering, many different versions exist for the passing tourist’s enjoyment. This concept inspired the Nord-Pas de Calais mining area, which applied for registration on Unesco’s World Heritage list.

All of this with financial backing from the European Union under grant programs for disadvantaged regions. Kiveton Park’s miners and workers everywhere looked on, disgusted but powerless, as the dough rolled in, filling the newcomers’pockets while their own emptied. It is indeed terrifying to witness capital’s triumph in those

areas. That was where capitalism begot its own worst enemy, the proletariat, and where the proletariat fought it with the greatest ferocity and was beaten, its last remaining combatants defeated.

John, a member of the proletariat, was more than disillusioned. Deep inside, he felt desperate bitterness, exacerbated by his lucidity and acute historical consciousness of defeat, as if he bore within him the memory of all past generations. The last time he showed me what had happened to Kiveton Park, tears of sorrow and rage dropped into his whisky.

After the year-long strike that had genuinely changed their lives, he and his peers suffered a tremendous sense of failure. Not only did he completely identify his own personal distress with the general disintegration, but he seemed to accumulate every misfortune since Pandora's box was first opened: no more job or money, serious illness, and the separation with his wife and partner. He hit the bottle with a vengeance and wasn't the only one; then there were those who sought harder highs, with or without a prescription. That plus the mine closure finally broke up the community ⁶ and, like many others, John felt lonely, isolated and weakened. A fish out of water.

Compounding the devastating present, an acute awareness of past defeats segued into a feeling of "no future." Just as John had always followed his own path, he decided at that point how to put an end to it.

Yet what I recall when thinking about John is a potential future. To us both, the simple fact of our meeting—he a Yorkshire miner and I an unemployed Parisian at the time—seemed to belie any kind of inevitable fatality. I remember the two of us and Pierre, a buddy jailed more than once for his refusal to work, spending the night discussing how unusual it was for people who led

such dissimilar lives to have so much in common. It was the strikers who first made these improbable friendships possible; like many others who identified with their struggle, we went to meet the strikers and realized just how much we shared. After friends introduced me to John, I came back again with Pierre, and soon the three of us realized how alike we were, three rebels with similar hates and dreams. That same night, we talked about work: for Pierre and myself, nothing was harder than working in the mine and for John, nothing was worse than prison. None of us could or would have wanted to exchange the way we earned a living for the other's. We all agreed, though, that the specific episodes of our individual lives, whether miner, unemployed or thief, were all conditioned by the same constraint –money– for which we had to work, and we hated that.

Work was our Hell on earth. We began to play around with that metaphor, trying it out in various versions and finding links between Hell's different circles: doing time in the mine's galleries and passageways or in jail in solitary confinement; physical and psychological suffering; firedamp explosions and suicides; all that lost time ... Miners and convicts tell the same jokes: "Is life there tough? Only for the first twenty years." We weren't really all that different; we wanted the same thing –to escape from our prisons and go breathe freely outdoors.

By daybreak, our increasingly animated and boozy conversations betrayed an overexcitement typical of sleepless nights. John began declaiming excerpts from Abiezer Coppe, one of those scandalous 17th-century English Ranters who wanted "to have all things common." Our rants mingled with those of Coppe, of which I've found snatches: "Your gold and your silver, although you see it not, are eaten by canker. The rust of your silver, I say, shall eat your flesh as it were fire. ...

The entire earth shall be the treasure of all and not just a few. And, should someone say, 'Why do they take our possessions,' the answer will be, 'We need them, and we at least take them to be used.' I pronounce this sentence against you, oh wealthy men, I will annihilate you, and lowly men will be delivered from slavery and the yoke in which the rich hold them."

We ended up in the garden with Pierrot yelling: "Give us a thousand John Dennises and we'll smash this whole fucking commodity society!"

Jack MALT



John Dennis

Foreword notes

1. The working class is made up not just of people who work for low wages (i.e. not just workers) but also all those who own nothing, people who are unemployed or on welfare, pensioners and the like. In a word, the poor. Great Britain is without doubt the country in Western Europe where class distinctions are the strongest. The City's bowler hats or the slum's rags are obvious examples – and almost caricatures – as are the accents and the way people identify with or distinguish themselves from the working class or, on the contrary, the bourgeoisie. One or the other and not much in between, since the middle class carries less numerical or electoral weight, its contours are fuzzier, and class origins rise to the surface again in no time. People are not only keenly aware of their social position and class, but often proclaim them, arrogantly if they're wealthy or proudly and with rage if they're not. This antagonism becomes strikingly evident during social conflicts, sometimes verging on civil war as in 1926, 1974 or 1984.

Towards the end of the miners' strike, the Anglican, Protestant and Catholic Churches, frightened by the conflict's violence and implacably opposing positions, officially joined together for the first time in their history to propose that the State make concessions in order to restore social peace. This had no more effect than the soccer games organized between cops and strikers by a handful of policemen and trade unionists, likewise frightened by the ferocity of the hatred.

2. These miners' community centers house a pub and trade union local. Usually for miners only, anyone could come to the centers during the strike except, of course, cops and scabs. Canteens were sometimes set up for strikers there, films were shown, there were debates, actions and parties, too. They stayed open all night – a place where you could drink and talk the night out, quite an exception in a country where 11 p.m. was the legal, inescapable closing time. Young people who weren't miners described this to us as a victory they wanted to keep after the strike.

3. Harry Roberts: a London hooligan who caused a real stir in the 60s by killing several cops during the shootout leading to his arrest. (The song goes on, “He shot the bastards in the head....”) Those very popular anti-cop lyrics made him a household name, even though people didn’t actually know him. He was their hero despite himself, like Robin Hood who stole from the rich, a legendary rebel in the role of cop-killer. He was released in the 90s after spending some thirty years in prison.

This song spearheaded showdowns with the police, the object of hatred mingled with scorn. Whether sung by soccer hooligans (no doubt the same who spray-painted “We’ll continue the war in the stadiums” on walls after the miners’ lost battle), striking printworkers (London, 1986), Poll Tax rioters (1990) or prison mutineers, this was the angry working class’ “hit” and even became a favorite nursery rhyme for many a kid in explosive working class neighborhoods.

4. Although widely used in Britain in a variety of expressions –from community police to community service– the miners talked of community as the collective way of life specific to each mining village. Actually, those ways of life were plural, and the miners generally spoke of communities. They stressed the fact that the State was attempting to destroy the communities, a far cry from the abstract community of all miners that the NUM and others talked about. Those special communities had a decisive impact on the strike, forging bonds which helped the strikers withstand the shortages as time wore on and exert sustained pressure on the NUM.

The hardest-fighting pits were those around which such a community pre-existed. In Cortonwood in early February 1985, there were only twenty-two scabs, twenty-one of whom had always lived outside the village. The twenty-second was soon forced to slip away unseen – it’s not very comfortable to live in a burnt-out house! In West Yorkshire on the other hand, where miners at the same pit often lived scattered over several villages, there were many scabs, and the strikers only got together on the pickets.

This way of life, about which the miners themselves entertained no illusions, should not be overemphasized. Most young

people began by rejecting the hard-working existence of their parents and came to accept going to work in the mines only after several years on the dole. Still, although they didn't like their work, they fought at the same time against the greater separation that the pit closures would necessarily bring and the government's dictates. The communities formed around a shared misery, found their true calling by rising up against the attempts to worsen that misery. They led to what the miners called "warrior communities."

5. A process that may have reached new heights in Cairo. The government planned to convert the section of old Cairo known as the "Islamic city" into a tourist complex by evicting its residents and ousting its famed garlic and onion merchants, to be replaced by troops of costumed actors who would play the role of ... garlic and onion merchants! An Egyptian architecture student working on the urban renewal plan was so revolted by what he described as "Islamic Disneyland" that he changed the course of his life and learned to become a pilot. His name was Mohamed Atta, principal organizer of the 9/11 attacks and one of the kamikazes who crashed their planes into the World Trade Center.

6. The breakdown of social ties and the new, tougher conditions of survival had severe consequences on Kiveton. Widespread vagrancy further deteriorated daily life, pitting people against each other and fueling petty crime. A few years ago, a small-scale race riot even broke out against a Pakistani restaurant.

Very young kids were behind this unrest. Born after the strike, most had no idea that it ever existed. They had lost not only the memory, but the values of solidarity and struggle linked to their parents' history. The impact of this loss of roots, combined with perpetually unsatisfied yearnings for the consumerist enticements of modern-day life, was devastating.



1984, Derbyshire: a women's picket in Shirebrook



Kiveton Park: John Dennis, magnificent striker and destroyed miner, a few months before his death, between two street signposts both characteristic of what happened after the strike – real estate development and urban paranoia.

A TRUE LIFE STORY
WRITTEN WITHOUT NAME NOR TITLE
by John Dennis

THIS STORY begins in the early sixties. I would be just sixteen years old, just entering the world of work. Life appeared good and for me everything seemed possible (people of my age are obliged to say that sort of thing about the sixties). Anyway, Europe at that time had a massive mining industry in which millions of people were employed and on which millions depended. We happily polluted the skies with our smoke and denuded the land and forests with our acid rain. The Beatles were beatling and The Stones were beginning to roll. Good whisky was about two pounds a bottle, beer was around seven pence a pint. We teenagers were being trained to provide the hands and minds that would begin to embrace the white heat of technology. Most of us in the mining communities seemed to have a place in the present and great expectations of the future. Ignorance was bliss and we were blissfully ignorant.

For such kids as myself who did not enjoy an above average intelligence or parents with middle-class aspirations we generally gleaned some sort of education from the secondary modern schools. Thus after spending five years learning the rudiments of social interaction, petty crime and sexual experimentation it would be time to leave and be taken into one of the three great soaks of the young white male in Yorkshire. For the majority it would be the mines, the steel industry or the armed forces. If you consider my family history and the proximity of the coal mines – six within a three mile radius and one on the doorstep – it's not too surprising that I should take what seemed to be the easy option and sign up with the NCB (National Coal Board).

After the primary euphoria of acceptance and a vigorous sixteen week training period a great disappointment befell me and the likes of me. Because we were above six foot in height and weighed less than eleven stones it was deemed that we were physically unsuited to become face workers. It would seem that the ideal face worker should be five feet nine high and five foot six across, social engineering maybe? The shame, all our clan had been underground workers, my father, his father, his father, cousins, brothers, maybe the odd sister, all of them members of that industrial elite, the money, the hours, the social kudos. I was willing to be killed, crippled or rendered lungless, if only I could have carried on the family tradition. Alas, no, so a compromise was made. I would be apprenticed into one or more of the mining trades. In

time I would be a blacksmith, welder, farrier, learn the mysteries of rope making and in my spare time make tea for the craftsmen, clean the workshop and not complain if I should be beaten up or sexually abused.

So it went busily on until one dull as dishwater morning in 1964 the foreman came to us and gave us our tasks for the day. He began with the opening, “John, Mick, Alan, you've shown such promise in your metalworking skills that the engineer has seen fit to give you lads the chance of a lifetime.” We heard the man's blatherings with some suspicion but not with optimism, he was Alan's father after all. What sort of a chance of a lifetime? Some task to test our newly founded skills? Some project in the mine to stretch our physical and mental capacities? Imagine our disbelief when the lickspittle gaffer's running dog said, “Lads, you're going to help build the Chief Engineer a sailing boat”.

I think it may be wise at this juncture to explain some of the social relationships between the miners, the village and the employers that existed during the 1960s and 70s. We seemed to be in a period of some consolidation between the barbarities of the coal owners and the savagery about to be unleashed during the Thatcher years. After nationalisation, conditions in the mines improved, poachers turned to game keepers, the NUM incorporated its powers. Investment in mining was massive, there seemed to be a tacit agreement that, “if it was good for the miners it was good for Britain”, and no doubt the miners thought vice versa.

In villages such as Kiveton Park with a population of around three thousand, one thousand worked at the mine and seven hundred in mining support industries. The old patrimony seemed to carry on seamlessly. The Dennis family like many more had fled the famine in Ireland during the middle of the 19th century. They had washed up on the shores of this uncompromising land and straightaway signed up to work in one of the most barbaric industries in Europe. Great grandfather John had been a shaft sinker at Kiveton Park, his son John a driver of tunnels. I would be the third and the last John Dennis to work at Kiveton Park Colliery. We lived in low rent houses owned by the NCB. The schools, medical facilities owed their beginnings to the miners, even the churches and chapels were built or renovated by the good will and labour of the workers. We would nowadays be described as a close community.

The hierarchy at the mine itself was only slightly revised from the days of the coal owners. The Colliery Manager could be likened to the captain of a nineteenth century sailing ship, his powers awesome, his responsibilities equally so, described by act of parliament he answered for every life, human or animal, every nut, bolt and cobble of coal, the mine and its environs and to a great degree, the social and economic life of the village in his grasping paws. Directly below him on the ladder to fame and fortune, stood peering up his trouser leg, my boss. The enginewright, to give his job description, would be engineer in charge of the mine. In those days enginewrights had

so much room in which to line their pockets and abuse their many powers, but one source of unending conflict between the manager (in charge of overall production) and engineer (in charge of the mode of production) was that machines would be smashed, worn out or sabotaged by the elements in a growing bolshy workforce. From the workers point of view the problem was really simple. It took x number of pounds to buy and maintain a mining machine. It took x number of pounds and two years of valuable time to train a pit pony. The workers earn and maintain their own keep. He or she is not a capital investment. For us the answer was simple. We not only stole the bosses' materials, we stole their time. To the bosses the machine and the pony were of more value than the workers. Also the government had decreed that machines and animals were tax deductible. In those days we knew exactly where we stood.

We all knew the pedigree of our enginewright and we all knew of his predicament in the year of the boat. In 1964 he would have been around sixty four years old, tired and embittered and certainly fraying at the edges. He had married young to the daughter of a second generation colliery manager. He was at that time a lowly machinist, she a lass of great appetite and social conscience. Naturally his ambitions to be an enginewright were fulfilled. Marrying the boss's daughter assured that. In fact in his younger days he was considered a rising star and it would only be a short time before he attained a place on the board of directors, owning several mines in that area. Then for

him tragedy. His wheel of fortune and fame developed a flat tyre. It was 1947 and those red-in-tooth and claw socialists went and nationalised the mines. No more would marrying the boss's daughter assure him of a safe passage on his slimy journey from rags to riches. In truth, marrying the boss's daughter scuppered any chance of furthering his career at all. The reason being the reputation of the father-in-law in question. This creature made Josef Stalin look positively avuncular. During his time as Squire of Waleswood and manager of Brookhouse Pit he took his pleasure by sacking any worker who displeased him then evicting them from their homes. Thuggery, buggery and intimidation were all watchwords. But to cap it all he and the mining company owned all the shops and public houses in the village, so by selling them cheap strong beer and relatively expensive food he entrapped the miners and their families into drunkenness, poverty and debt. Even by his contemporaries he was considered an ineffable bastard which must put him in the same league as (fill this space if you know of anyone that wicked who has not been exposed in the full glare of left-wing historians or the mass media).

Thankfully, “the mills of justice may grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small” and the lousy old sod got his punishment in the true and tried English tradition. Firstly, he was given the options of resign or carry on working, sharpening pencils in some obscure office in deepest Doncaster. If he resigned he would be forced to take approximately ten years wages in lieu of lost earnings. His shares in Waleswood Mining

Company would be bought from him at premium prices and his pensions would be paid in cash on the day of his resignation. He died a mere 87 years old in his swimming pool on the island of Antigua, some say from a surfeit of rum and rent boys. His days of shame and exile must have given great satisfaction to those many poor and damaged souls he inflicted such gross inhumanities upon. But worse still our poor enginewright was shuffled to the sidelines, there to waste his remaining years, a frustrated Brunel. His wife, now of independent means, would desert him at least twice in the year to do good works in the East End of London or to sojourn with struggling young artists in the steamier regions of Italy. His children despised him, his colleagues pitied him and we made his life as unhappy as he tried to make ours'.

At times of great despondency he would unburden his woes around the pubs and clubs of the villages. It is said that during one of these two-bottle unburdenings he came upon the idea of building a boat that upon his retirement would take him through the canals and rivers of England and thus escape the miseries of mining and the contempt of his family. The spirits guide us in mysterious ways.

Between the Pit Manager and the enginewright there was an old festering conflict. As an ex-lover of the engineman's wife the manager knew well his propensity for drink and theft, but the enginewright knew of the manager's weakness for cooking the figures (which enhanced his bonus) and the fact that

bedding another man's wife would not enhance the happiness of that pillar of the local Methodist community, the manager's wife.

The dimensions of that boat would be thus: in length 18 feet, in width 6 feet, the mast 16 feet tall, the hull to be made of supermarine plywood, the fitments and fittings to be hand crafted, the engine to be a two litre Coventry Climax converted from the pit potable fire pump, hydraulics and pipe work gratis from Doughty, the labour and time gratis the NCB. It was to be built in the carpenter's workshop but hidden from prying eyes by a canvas partition.

My tasks from the beginning would be to hand finish all the many copper and brass fitments which would be delivered from the foundry in a rough condition. It's strange how fortune seems to favour the favoured. In this case it manifested itself in the guise of the foreman carpenter, his war service had been spent in the construction of torpedo boats for the British and US Navy. After five years of bending plywood in some Norfolk backwater he could nearly do it blindfold. The sealords work in mysterious ways.

At the start of the project we didn't mind the painstaking and repetitive nature of the work, after all there was a certain thrill in taking part in such a scandal. Then there was the fact that much of the work was done outside production time. This meant working Saturday and Sunday, time and a half and double time respectively. Add to this the fact that if we felt like a

lazy hour in the workshop we would take a small work piece, place it in the vice and pretend to file or polish it. The foreman would peer over our shoulders, put his finger at the side of his nose, nod sagely, then slope off to pester some other unfortunate.

But alas the novelty began to subside and maybe the work began to suffer as a consequence, or maybe we were beginning to react to the attitude of the enginewright. He was becoming obsessed with the time the work was taking. He would stride down the workshop, arms waving, spittle splashing, eyes popping. “Two hours to polish a bollard, that's bollocks Dennis!” This hurt. All craftsmen know the adage, “More haste less speed”. It's imprinted in the back of our minds like a mantra, so we naturally resent such talk.

After work we'd sit in the pub and talk of the really important things such as money, sex, money, Alan's latest wet dream (they were becoming really bizarre). The things that lad got up to in his sleep would keep a Jungian trick cyclist in work for a lifetime. On the afternoon of the gaffer's outburst about my bollocking bollards, he related his dream of the night before. It seems he was page boy to the mother of the queen. It involved him guiding the penis of the queen mother's horse into her vagina (which was tastefully kept from view by a tartan blanket) while he was being masturbated by the young Princess Anne, naked but for a golden miner's helmet. Bloody hell! Then we'd talk about money again, the advantages of the condom as

a device for halting premature ejaculation, the quality of the beer and then finally the boat and how everybody but the bloody enginewright was becoming so disenchanted with the whole bloody project.

Things took an extra turn for the worse a few days later when the enginewright brought his new assistant to the workshops on what could be described as a guided tour, during which he mapped out the pitfalls, snares and traps his prodigy would encounter in his daily dealings with the proletariat. In fact on passing our workbench at which I was putting the final shine onto another (or was it the same?) bollard the old snake said to his new gofer, "Watch that bastard Dennis. He's idle, shifty and he'd steal the coat off the back of a leper." I was most offended, shifty indeed! I'd never been called shifty before. This new guy was of old mining stock but had just graduated from Sheffield University. He had the wit to understand the boat situation but from the onset he had made it clear that he would collect feathers in his cap if by hassling, hustling and bustling he could expedite the completion of the "Marie Celeste" (as the boat had now become known to we three apprentices). To these ends this man would be found prowling the workshops at 6.30 in the morning. Management in its senior forms would never be seen before 9 a.m. if the good running of any enterprise is to be assured, workers in all walks of life understand this basic tenant. This guy would appear before we'd finished wiping the sleep from our eyes and say in a loud voice, "Right men, let's show the boss what we can do. Come on,

let's get cracking!" Indeed one morning he said to the foreman, "Get the bollard boys off the boat work and onto some fucking pit work. It's a bleeding disgrace this workshop." Imagine the foreman's shame at being usurped by an overweening toe rag the likes of an assistant engineer. Also the added shame of having his son described as a "bollard boy", this epithet was to remain with Alan for many years. In fact to this day when father and son are seen together the cry will go up: "Here comes Blacksmith Bill and his bollard boy," a remaining stain on a proud working family.

The situation finally came to a head one morning when the assistant discovered the foreman blacksmith trying to fold a piece of canvas into the boot of his car. The assistant with his usual calm and considered approach said, "Right! What do you think you're doing stealing the Gaffer's sailcloth?" The blacksmith replied, "This is not a sail, this is a hammock for my back garden, so fuck off". The assistant stamped his feet, turned pink, turned purple, whipped off his helmet and kicked it across the car park shouting, "Right, that's it. You're sacked, fired, I'm going to have you prosecuted." You may have guessed that by this time everybody called him Mr. Right. But let's not digress. The assistant went to the manager, the foreman of the Union and the rest of us looked like going on strike.

In 1964, my father and the pit manager would be 53-54 years old. They'd both left school at 14 years of age and had started in the pits as pony drivers, their job to lead the pit ponies pulling the tubs on their jour-

ney from the coal face to the collecting points. To the pit bottom it was an arduous and dangerous journey. In those days it was a rigourous training for even harder things to come. Their careers had parallels in time and in some ways circumstances. When I look at photographs of my father as a teenager at 14-15 years old I can see a child but eyes are already ageing beyond his time. His body is that of the small Dennis's – around 5'6" (full grown 5'9"), big shoulders, thin waist, long arms and those silly tendril-like fingers that we'd all inherit – except for his hands the perfect mining shape. Early in life George, through the influence of his beloved mother learned to and became a talented violin player. The manager at that same age found that most cherished of Yorkshire sports, cricket.

During the 1926 strike father learned hard lessons about the lack of solidarity of the English workers when threatened by the middle classes. In the late twenties he joined the Communist Party. Our manager in the meantime through his ambitions to rise in mining and his contacts in the higher echelons of cricket became a deputy (underground foreman). Father led a local dance band, the manager led Worksop cricket team and was very active in the North Notts Tory party. They both married in the late 1930's. The manager left the Tory Party in 1939 because of the appeasement of the Chamberlain government. Father left the Communist Party in 1941 when Stalin signed the non-aggression treaty with Hitler. In 1964, father at that time was union secretary, enjoying all the benefits that the position accrued to him, one of which

was having intelligence on all the dubious doings of his membership at the mine at that time. Mr. Right had hardly finished his tirade in the car park before father was on his way to the manager's office with certain cards to lay on the table and a few kept in reserve up his sleeve. His main argument was really direct and to the point. If any action were taken against the foreman blacksmith he'd be on the phone to the area offices describing the scandal of an engineer who seemed to think he was Noah and his upstart assistant who didn't understand the basic rules of one illegal item for the management meant one for the workers. The manager didn't even alter his countenance, he just waved his pen in the air and said, "George, what do you expect from a young lad straight from college. Let's talk about getting a little bit more effort out of these chaps down in the headings." To father that meant the subject had been settled satisfactorily. Mr. Right was less than satisfied when he was called to the presence later that morning. The information came back to father via the manager's personal secretary, who was allowed by the manager to hand down information to the workers when the occasion suited. The meat of the interview was as follows. "What do you mean stealing canvas? There's enough canvas in the stores to fit out the fucking Spanish Armada. Mind your ways laddie or it's the Scottish coalfields for you".

Young Mr. Right, a well chastened assistant, was very subdued for long into the future, but still given to uncontrollable helmet kicking when primed and fired by the expert wind-up artists.

Let me explain my piece in the jigsaw. For example, as many as fifteen bollards would arrive at the mine from the foundry. The attachments look like the letter "T". They are fixed firmly; thereby ropes can be safely tied off and sales and masts can be made secure. Each small brass object would arrive from the foundry in a rough condition. To make it smooth the sharp edges had to be taken off with a very coarse file. Then marks and gouges had to be taken out by a less coarse file until a smooth file could be used to take out those marks, then metal abrasive cloths and then a polish hard and a polish soft. But every time I looked at the boat I was charmed, its lines, the work, it was becoming pleasing to the eye and to my mind a pest. For my two friends it may have been worse. The fitting of the engine and the keel would be educational but just as exasperating.

Later that day, showered, needlessly shaved and very thirsty we assembled ourselves at the bar of the Saxon Hotel. There we ordered our beers from one of the few Calvinist barmaids in the county of Yorkshire. She held we youngsters in the deepest contempt saying we were doomed to the fires of hell and damnation due to our drinking, gambling, fornications and foul-mouthed unruly behaviour, then promptly gave us the wrong change (always short) and screamed for the landlord if we complained. This woman exercised my curiosity no end. She would wear low cut sweaters hardly hiding her upthrusting breasts, the shortest of mini-skirts, make-up by the kilo and then declaim religion in a manner which would have made Martin Luther King reach for his tape recorder.

In those days we would drink our first two pints standing at the bar (why waste time and energy walking?), order the next round, then find a table away from the jukebox and set about the foul-mouthed repartee which would so inflame the senses of our beloved barmaid. We were thus engaged when in walked father, who with no more ado came up to our table and sat down. "Well lads, I've just come from a chat with the manager and Alan's dad. I think the best solution is for you lads and everybody concerned to get your fingers out and get the bloody thing finished and off the premises as quickly as possible."

I couldn't believe my ears. What was he saying? Rush a job which by my crude estimations would, if dragged out for another three months, earn the people involved at least four hundred pounds in overtime let alone hours of fruitful pleasure baiting the bosses? No way daddio! I saw his eyes glint and his shoulder muscles hunch when Mick said, "Bollocks! Whose fucking side are you on? Are you up the manager's arse or something? This is money for old rope and it's going to last as long as we can spin it out." Father turned to me smiling, then as quick as a cobra back to Mick and grabbed him by the throat pulling him over the table and whacking him on the side of the head with his open hand. Mick spun to the floor, mouth open, eyes ablaze and hand reaching for a bottle. Things looked on the verge of serious violence when a voice high on righteousness and indignation rang out, "George Dennis, have you no shame? Striking a boy just out of school, not old enough to vote, let

alone see the ways of the Lord. Well, I think it's time you and your Communist kind were hounded out of office and sent back to Russia. And as for you, young Michael, he could no more creep up a gaffer's arse than an elephant's, his bloody head is too big. Now get out the lot of you afore I call the police."

Father stormed out first and we trailed after. This boat business was getting out of hand. As we stood on the terrace of the pub watching father stride away, the words came hissing out of Mike, "if he ever tries anything like that again, I'll fucking have the bastard." Try as I may I couldn't think of any reply that would support him without betraying father. Then Alan said, "Did you see her when she lent over the bar? Did you? Her titties just about fell out, they did. You could see the brown bits. You know the ear holes? Fucking hell, I hope I dream about her tonight. Talk about hard-on." I looked at Mick, we both looked at Alan, shook our heads and headed towards the working men's club. I didn't want to see father just yet.

I arrived home after a couple of subdued pints to find father and mother just getting over one of those rows, the subjects of which tend to rumble on for years between couples who have been married for nearly quarter of a century, in this case, booze, money and the union – mother hated the first, never had enough of the second and resented the third, father loved all three. For the next half hour mother berated the both of us with our shortcomings. These included my moral laxity in not defending father, his propen-

sity for violence, Mike's hypocrisy, him coming from a family that had scabbed during the 1926 general strike and the mortal folly of drinking in the afternoon. When a person like mother took the high moral ground it was wise to sit down, switch off and think of barmaids with big boobs, just hoping she'll finish the tirade before the potato pie became too cold to eat (see Vol. 1 – “The Matriarchs in Mining Villages” for a different perspective of life when the bounds of their reason were overstepped).

About mother. My mother's father had been killed in a mining accident in 1928. Kiveton pit after the defeat of the miners in 1926 was not a good place to work. The miners at Kiveton had been some of the most militant in Yorkshire. Now the bosses had the whip hand and they cracked that whip with increasing brutality. Conditions and pay had degenerated to almost pre-1914 standards. Mother's family hand the story down that the undertaker had to put stones in the coffin to give the illusion of at least a little weight, there being so little of grandad to bury. The manner of his death was a scandal even for those dreadful times. The man in charge of igniting the explosives (the shotfirer) had set six separate sticks of gelignite, these he would fire in succession. This would bring the wall of rock down in a controlled manner instead of firing the charges simultaneously which would lead to unforeseen and chaotic results. The bloody man miscounted, he fired only five, then ordered grandfather forward to remove the fallen rubble. The poor man was standing over No. 6 shot

when it exploded, he took the full force of the blast and was never seen again. All that was remaining could easily have been put into a small shopping basket without filling it. Not even his boots were recovered. The shotfirer was demoted and fined a week's wages, grandmother was given £ 100 and a pension of 4 shillings a week for life, but only if she would accept that her husband's death was due to his own fault. She had five daughters and two sons. The boys, just out of school, went into the mines. The girls, all except one, went into "service" (this was a euphemism used to describe young girls working for low wages in the houses of the middle classes). All her life mother venerated the memory of her father and would become misty-eyed and tearful at the mention of his name. She was twelve years old when he was killed; she has many stories of the hard life.

Due to a surfeit of Sam Smith's bitter, potato pie and a troubled mind I overslept next morning. When I arrived in the carpenter's shop it was to find Alan staring into the fireplace. The blaze was huge and the heat intense. "What the fuck are you burning, Napalm? That's ridiculous!" I was standing about twenty feet away and my overalls were beginning to steam. I could just hear Alan's reply over the roaring of the flames. "It's that cotton waste you used yesterday to soak up that spilled varnish and paraffin. I threw it on the embers, it warmed up, smoked a bit, then WHOOSH! Fucking great, hey?" "Fucking great? Fucking fantastic, that's what!"

It was one of those occasions on which two people have the same idea at the same time and no words need to be spoken, all that's wanted is time and certain trigger words to channel the thought process along similar avenues. In our case the words were Revenge and Blame – how to achieve our revenge and not take the blame. The conflagration subsided as quickly as it had begun, but it was gratifying to note that the wrought irons in front of the fire place still glowed a dull red after the fire had settled to its usual level. Our plans had to be set aside for the time being when the foreman arrived to give us our jobs for the day. I was to apply the umpteenth coat of varnish, Alan was to assist in assembling the steering gear. The mechanic working on the boat that day was to be George Marsh. His nickname (but not to his face) was Bog Breath.

That morning we ate our sandwiches and drank our tea and tried not to get too close to George's halitosis, we would look at each other and smirk and use phrases which only the two of us would know the secret relevance. Finally old Bog Breath had suffered enough innuendo, turned towards us and shouted, "Are you two shagging each other?"

This would not have mattered too much had he not sprayed us with half chewed lumps of cheese and onion sandwich, mixed and softened with his usual strong black coffee. We quickly straightened our faces, washed our cups and went back to varnishing and tinkering. After work we sat in The Saxon together playing cards and planning how we could

utilise this gift of wonderful destruction without being sent to prison for the rest of our teenage years and beyond. We thought of making electric devices which could ignite the varnish, we thought of clockwork devices, we thought of elaborate fuses. Fantasies evolved and disappeared but with each plan the risk outweighed the gain or proved impractical for our limited skills. As we sat, subdued and thoughtful, becoming more frustrated by the minute, in strode father. "Hello lads, I'm looking for volunteers to carry our 'Beloved Union' banner in the carnival on Saturday. You three are perfect. You're young and fit and you'll be given free drinks in the beer tent at the end of the march."

After the nastiness of the previous days Alan and Mick were none too keen to comply with father's proposition, but like Paul's vision on the road to Damascus it came to me – "THE CARNIVAL". Every year the management, the church and the chapels put aside their rivalries and sponsored a carnival on the second Saturday in August. This coincided with the religious harvest festival and the return to work of the miners from their annual holidays. Also every year after this carnival day would follow carnival night, naturally. During the daylight hours of carnival most of the enjoyment was focused on the children, the fair-ground, the fancy dress parade, the games, fathers being pelted by soaking sponges, mothers hiding pieces of rock and broken glass in the sponges and all the things that make a carnival a carnival. But after twilight things would change. In the local church hall

many of the famous rock bands of the sixties would raise the emotional temperature to boiling point. Freddy and The Dreamers would create the adolescent nightmare of unrequited love. The Seekers would be lost forever. In pubescent orgasms, as young girls threw their soaking underwear onto the stage, young men would seethe. Gene Vincent would slink onto the stage, clad in shiny black leather, and promise covertly with his index finger to stimulate places in the female anatomy that young Yorkshire miners had yet to discover. We seethed, being the rough-arsed rednecks that we were. Instead of burning down the church and church hall, stuffing Gene Vincent's digit up his own arse and giving The Dreamers and The Searchers a nightmare to remember, we would turn inward and fight each other. The cops loved it. After we had finished kicking the shit out of each other, they would arrive and carry on kicking the shit out of us. What a wonderful decay.

We made the molotov cocktail using a wide-neck milk bottle so that the petrol would splash even if the bottle didn't break. Before the end of the shift on Friday I collected all the varnish-soaked wasted cloth and spread it at the side of the boat. All we needed was Saturday night and luck. The decision as to who should do the job was easy. I was the hardest drinker and the fastest runner and, shit, it was my idea anyway.

During the carnival and on the march through the streets we met the bastards who had given us the hard times with the boat. The Enginewright and his assis-

tant shouted to us as we carried the banner, “Nearest you three have been to work in months. Nice work lads. At least you can follow the band.” We smiled. We took part in the games that children of all ages enjoy – drinking, eating, hitting, throwing balls, laughing at others and being laughed at. After a while we forgot our secret agenda and became part of the carnival.

The British are renowned throughout Europe for their inability to deal with alcohol and rightly so. Adults are regarded as children. When buying booze and drinking in public, the times would be strictly enforced. Between 11 o’clock in the morning and 3 o’clock in the afternoon you could buy a drink in a pub (then you must rest). Between 6 o’clock in the evening and 10.30 you could buy a drink in a pub (then you must rest). Thank you Mother State but no thanks. Treat people like children and they behave like children. So it was with us. By 2.30 in the afternoon the consumption of beer had become ferocious. The young girls of our milieu had become emboldened by Babycham and barley wine (a most potent brew devised by a witch and warlock in Norfolk), we young men rowdy and bilious on black puddings, pork pies and warm ale.

The entertainment for the rest of the day was set. As we lounged in the sun, searching for dregs to drink or underwear in which to wander, we became restless at the futility of it all and made our ways home to wash and dress for the evening enchantment.

The off-licence is a peculiar place. It can sell all manner of goods but could only sell booze at the times mentioned above. Thankfully, the owners of these places were, and still are, greedy, unscrupulous and totally understanding of the teenage predicament. Therefore, before going into a gig or concert we would fortify ourselves before entering the totally tee-total church hall or equally benign establishment. In those days, under such circumstances, I would drink two or three bottles of Guinness and buy half a bottle of rum to mix with the coke to be bought inside. Alan would buy brandy to give to the girls who had smuggled in Babycham (brandy and Babycham – another potent mixture from Norfolk), Mick would smuggle Bacardi in, drink two-thirds of the bottle, then re-fill it with water and pass it round with largesse (nobody ever suspected him) and so the night progressed.

If I remember correctly the group that headed the bill that night was Wayne Fontana and The My Members, a bunch of fortunate 23 year olds posing as teenagers. Wayne Fontana looked old beyond his years even then, lucky bastard. As I watched I became him, as I picked up the pheromones my mind began to wander again – this was not the plan – WHAT PLAN?

Glad to relate that as the night wore on I became drunker by the minute. The rest of the story was given to me the next day. It would seem that the three of us had agreed to separate and then meet up at the bridge on Hard Lane. We then met at least five people walking back to the next village (Harthill) and had drunken

conversations. We then strolled through the pit yard, picked up our molotovs, lit them, threw them through the carpenter's window and wandered as pissed as rats to the end of Pit Lane. By the time the fire alarm was raised we were sat across from the tobacconist's wondering what the fuck all these people could be dashing about at. The next day after the admonishments of mother about drinking till early on a Sunday we met at The Saxon. The first pint is the most important after a night when you can't remember how you arrived home or found your bed. After the first sips I asked Alan, "How did it go?" He answered, "Great! Don't you just love the smell of Sunday dinners cooking?" I said, "Who's got the blame?" He said, "Some bunch of drunken revellers from Harthill. Seems they threw half a bottle of whisky through the joiner's shop window and it caused a flashback from that great fireplace that's always smouldering in there. My comment according to Alan and Mick was: "Fucking waste of good whisky."

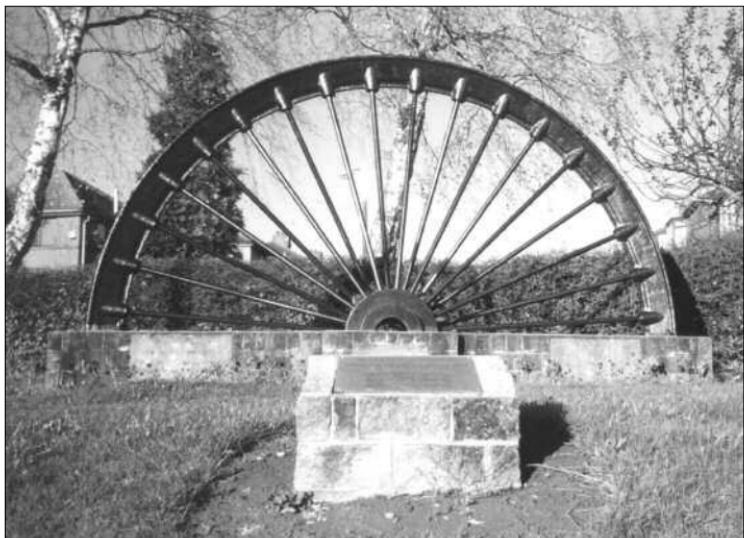
John DENNIS, 1998



*March 1984, a picket at "Fort Alamo":
Cortonwood (Yorkshire), first pit to go on a wildcat strike.*



1984, Kiveton Park, Yorkshire. *Wheel of Misfortune (1): the headframe at a stop.*



2004, Kiveton Park. *Wheel of Misfortune (2): a memorial to closed pits.*

THE MINERS: JENNY DENNIS TELLS HER TALE

Our collective defeat

SUDDENLY, there it was on the pages of the daily *Sheffield Star* and local TV and radio: the 20th anniversary of the miners strike. The memories: 5th of March 1984 Cortonwood near Barnsley to close – what immediately became known as “The Alamo” – the point where the miners said enough is enough followed by an immediate wildcat strike throughout Yorkshire and beyond. I just burst into uncontrollable floods of tears. It seemed like yesterday but recollections crashed and collided within me as instant pains in my heart and head became excruciating. The emotion was almost too much to bear.

Let’s go back to that very moment. As a miner’s wife we knew a strike was coming and we kind of felt

in our bones it was going to be something pretty big, some kind of Rubicon none of us had crossed before in our lives. I remember automatically thinking in a practical way – just what are we going to do; just how are we going to survive with a young family to look after. Cortonwood and immediate survival worries. How much more difficult was it going to be when for years I'd spent so much time trying to balance paying rent and bills – robbing Peter to pay Paul – and the money always petering out before next week's wages were due. Most of the wages were handed over to me but would John, my miner husband, control his drinking? No nights in the pub after the shift etc. Home brew here we go.....

I had already partially prepared for what seemed like the inevitable managing to get a part time job that would at least bring a little money in even though I well knew it just wouldn't be enough. I hadn't worked since the children were born but through an aunty who cleaned in a nearby technical college at Clowne I fortunately managed to get a five month stand-in, maternity leave job from January to June 1984. It was in the college's refectory where I organised 1,600 meals a day. Then the college closed for the summer and we really were down on our uppers.

And then 20 years later gazing at all the things around me just seemed to redouble my anguish and crying. Such great hopes and 20 years later still experiencing everywhere the desolation of what the state did to us. All around the scars of defeat: the near elimination of the mining community and here I was driving through a landscape – my landscape – where no pit winding gear was anywhere to be seen, except as a half

wheel sculpture-like marker on the cross roads through Kiveton Park or a few buildings left like the clockhouse or the pit head baths because English Heritage had deemed them significant architectural monuments and far more important than discarded miners. Alas, our small community pit villages had become opened up not to friends but to new Barrett type estates appearing everywhere unveiled as “executive suites” where strangers with no feel for our area’s past history moved in – often middle income personnel from all over the UK – redefining the area as dormitory towns (they’re even signposted near Sheffield under the South African name of “townships”). The point is: once I knew everybody I passed on the way to the local shop, their family history, their parents, grand parents and relatives, now – almost it seemed overnight – you no longer know a lot of the people you pass in the street and it’s getting to the point you feel a total alien on your own stomping ground. And then to cap it all now the whole of the Kiveton pit site is in the process of redevelopment and the amazing wildlife that flourished on the spoil heaps and which we all delighted in, has been engulfed by an umbrella group under the dubious name of Yorkshire Forward. Grimly turning my head away I cannot look at the small army of dumper trucks smoothing everything out for some Design and Build business park. Sure Yorkshire Forward proclaim their bogus ecological sensitivity when all they are doing is sending nature backwards!

Little did I realise on that fateful day Cortonwood went out on strike all of this was about to change in a crazily chaotic way never to reappear as it once had been as everyone involved in the strike was about to be

thrown into a maelstrom they've never really gotten out of all these years later. If only it could be limited to changes in the urban landscape or to views outside the kitchen window or daily life rituals! No it was to be far more. The end result of the strike was a far more total devastation as I thought of the human consequences of a brutal defeat for all of us who had the temerity to take on the state and very near win out against it. And the aftermath: the large amount of families I personally knew that were to disintegrate and fall apart. The agonies, the alcoholism, the heroin, the anti-depressants, the many suicides, and the increasing illness both psychological and physical –often at one and the same time – this defeat entailed. And then the simple post strike survival necessities as money became scarcer as jobs dried up and I thought of a family I knew who only a week previously in late February 2004 had finally managed to pay off the debts incurred during the year long uprising. This I also knew was no exception. The countless, untold suffering visited on fine people like the vast majority of miners who fighting for a community also spoke for others and beckoned to an outside world who also really wanted these things in the face of a present day, horrible world beginning to take shape where isolation, loss and general pathological behaviour was grooming its entrance on stage everywhere.

The end of the miners' strike also marked a huge change in the way the state dealt with those it defeated. Previously you could say the state's behaviour was marked by a certain chivalry particularly in the period of reconstruction after the end of the Second World War. This time it was different. As John emphasised,

now they had to go on and on and on kicking your head until you dropped dead. The state would no longer dole out some pious forgiveness, as you had to be damned to eternity, vilified while – as it were – conducting the funeral. Moreover, all memory of what took place had to be vanquished. On a subliminal level it was and is like the strike never happened. It seemed a simple job description like “miner” had to be virtually erased from the dictionary or if not that, it had become the equivalent of “shame”. Just this August, the somewhat lefty C4, TV news presenter, Krishnan Guru-Murthy, had the temerity to refer to our struggle as “the infamous miners’ strike”! Like many another I have had to try and live in this hostile atmosphere yet how can I do so without real pain? At a safe distance maybe you could say it’s paranoia but it’s surprising how it did make its way into peoples’ heads and remains there. So you began to try and continue your existence in a world where the most important part of your life was a simple figment of an over-worked (and lurid) imagination! It amounts to a murderous assault on my psyche and sanity that is simply not easing up. Here am I daily confronting wrecked lives and an often suicidal unhappiness and yet called a misery guts because I am unable to believe in a media/designer mythology of progress and nicey, nicey, lives I was now supposedly sufficiently programmed to proclaim. Here I am full of a dark disposition and forebodings yet also full of a yearning for a real joyous, passionate life!

Siding with the strikers wasn’t really a choice for me back then in 1984. I just knew I had to get involved and fight like I’d never fought before in my life to support the men like John who had bravely gone out on

strike against a brutal, couldn't give a damn Tory government. I also saw it as a fight for the community and not only the immediate interests of my family and the children I was bringing up with as much care, attention and daily love as I could muster. Even at the time, I wondered if in the future this commitment would be readily understood by my children that I was fighting for a better world not simply abandoning them but trying to make sure that their future foundations and general happiness would be more certain and fulfilling. In the aftermath of defeat and general obliteration it's not easy to keep this simple objective clearly shining through.

Before the strike and for sometime I had been involved in community issues and had even been voted in as a local Labour party councillor, which nonetheless meant constantly locking horns with a Labour party fiefdom like Rotherham council. In a way we pushed it as far as we could bending the rules to the point of breaking just as long as we could force things more our way. I even got involved in local early environmental schemes as the soil heap of Waleswood pit – closed in the late 1950s – got turned into the basis for Rother Valley Country Park where a kind of wilderness of gorse and reed-filled lakes created from the pit pumping ponds through the following years brought in all sorts of wildlife. 1984 was something different, something bigger and of far greater consequence. I tried to carry on but things rapidly came to a head and I resigned my position as a Labour councillor overcome with disgust at the antics and collaborationist policies of the Labour party as they danced to the tune of Mrs. Dracula Thatcher.

Almost everybody on strike in the mining community quickly knew this was something out of the ordinary and quite unlike the previous strikes of 1972 and 1974. It was altogether on a different scale and not a strike over wages (in 1972 breaking PM Edward Heath's Tory government's wage restraint policy) although it's perhaps possible to say it was on a wider level an extension of "the who governs, the miners or the government" strike of 1974 which took place during a parliamentary election contest. Because it was on such a dramatic scale and with the immediate splits between the non-working and working miners (i.e. scabs) – mainly from the areas to the south of Yorkshire especially Nottinghamshire – the strike rapidly involved an individual's active dimension. To be or not to be...



2004: the last remains of Kiveton Park's coalmine.



*March 1984, Blidworth, Nottinghamshire:
confrontation on the picket line.*

Perhaps I should begin at the beginning...

I WAS BORN into a relatively middle class household and moved to Kiveton aged 10. We weren't rich but my parents eventually owned a small furniture shop and they wanted me to make my proper way in the world and were brought up in the family with strong puritanical beliefs that idleness is a sin. I had other ideas, feelings and other ways of behaviour right from being a child and would love staying with an aunty in York, as she had few airs and graces and didn't insist that I had to wear those bodices, which were common for girls like myself at the time. As the eldest I was "mother's helper" and taught how to properly run a home where cooking and shopping to budget were taught on a daily basis. This however was the front and image presented as actually for 7 years I suffered weekly sex abuse by my grandfather that was never dealt with but kept hidden by my middle class parents. It inevitably caused a breakdown when I was sixteen and a half.

Thus I cracked up and spent a long period in the care of Sheffield social services whilst barely a teenager. In time I attended Pond St technical College to study catering. Actually I had already developed quite a knack for cooking. At the age of 14 I'd wag it from school and found work in a transport cafe by the main road at Woodhouse Mill. I got 10 shillings (50 pence in today's money) making and serving breakfast, dinners plus washing up. I loved it as I learnt many tricks of the trade like frying onions just after the breakfast period which drivers couldn't resist thus enticing them to buy a full course dinner. I also learnt how to make Yorkshire puddings, scones and buns on a large scale and throw

spaghetti at walls and if it stuck you knew it was cooked!

Catering college though was different and I was mixing with girls wearing all the trendy gear coming on stream in the 1960s. However, living in a local social services children's home I was under care orders I had to wear regulation uniform of yellow gingham dresses with peter pan collars when the others were wearing Mary Quant/Twiggy clothes like black and white mini-skirts with white boots and so on. It really upset me. I did work experiences in the canteens of big steel works like Steel Peach and Toser and Phoenix and in the holidays was a live-in nanny for the Canon of Sheffield cathedral. This was a real eye opener finding out how the rich lived. I was good at it though and was even offered a job in Buckingham Palace in London but the Queen (as I was to find she is famous for) only paid pauper's wages so I turned it down.

At this moment age 18 finally saying goodbye to the institution I attended a wedding of a friend in Wales. It was a lively, drunken do and during the shindig I happened to look under a table and among all the empty bottles and glasses was this guy hiding under the table and helping himself to any drinks on the table above. He was friendly and had a welcoming smile and we started talking away like there was no tomorrow. The attraction was instant. It was John Dennis and he was a welder and surface worker at Kiveton pit. He wondered what I was doing tomorrow and asked if I'd like to go ratting with him and his dog on the pit spoil heap. I hardly needed to be asked. That night walking me home he proposed and I accepted.

I never regretted it as the love was truly intense

between us until shattered by the personal hell endured with the strike's defeat. My parents though were horrified and refused to accept let alone attend our wedding. They even applied to a local court, as you had to be 21 then to get married. Eventually though they capitulated but insisted on holding their own reception. Thus JD and I had two separate parties with 2 cakes and 2 quite different sets of guests. My parents refused to speak to John's parents and during the ceremony the vicar chose to talk about "the family" which really was a complete waste of time. Just before the ceremony my mother relented and a bus of 52 people arrived from York and until that change of mind we had to pay for our wedding. Nonetheless by then most things had been catered for. I'd bought a second hand dress for £5 and on the wedding morn I went to nearby Clumber Park to pick my own flowers and tied them with a simple ribbon. I could afford a few things as I was working at the mental hospital and many of the patients came to the ceremony. John's mother baked our wedding cake and all the people in the terraces where they lived enthusiastically joined in. It was so communally organised that one house was for the presents, another for the old folks, one for young folks, one for snogging, one for dancing and music and one for all the all the home made food – even the bread was home-baked. Everybody waved us off to Scarborough for our honeymoon. I kept looking at my wedding and engagement ring never realising all those years later I was going to be forced to sell them during the strike to pay an electricity bill.

For a number of years afterwards my parents could hardly bring themselves to speak to me thinking I'd

married beneath my status in life. I had but it wasn't all that unusual. You must remember that in the coalfield areas of Yorkshire the miners kind of held sway stamping their presence on so many things. They were the firm underbellies for that warm, caring, socially active and conscious egalitarianism the area is famous for as well as its remarkable intelligence, which also imprinted itself generally. In short, the miners were really respected even by those who opposed them. The same was to happen with my parents who after the initial shock horror slowly began to sympathise until finally during 1984/5 they went right behind the miners' strike. Friedrich Engels in his book *The Conditions of the Working class in England* written in 1844 and which had such an influence on Karl Marx mentions how a deepening historical consciousness in the minds and hearts of working men was proving to be attractive to ladies of good standing! In Engels' case, as it so happens, it was the other way on, as he remained happily living with his former mill worker girlfriend to the end of his days. Even though it was well over a 100 years later Engels' prescient comment meant the same impulse was still bearing fruit.

John and I settled in the row of miners' cottages on Park Terrace just opposite Kiveton Park Colliery and where we'd experienced our wedding celebration. 46, Park Terrace proved to be a rebirth, a new world for me, a kibbutz of a community where everybody helped each other out participating in each others joys and woes. John's parents lived at No. 11. In the next few years it became almost exclusively my world, which I rarely ventured out of except to go to Jessops hospital to give birth to my children. For years up to the 1984/5

strike I'd hardly moved out of Kiveton Park even to go to Wales – the adjacent village – or other villages close by never mind a city like Sheffield even though our postcode was stamped Sheffield. OK, there was the occasional packed train trip or a week's holiday to Scarborough and Skegness on the Lincolnshire coast but that was about it. And I had been reasonably content carrying on like this utterly absorbed in the life of the local community. There I was "making homes" for myself and for others like elderly relatives who could no longer cope for themselves. It was nice secretly doing up a poorly aunt's house while she was away somewhere then suddenly revealing it to her and looking at the sheer joy on her face. It was a village creed if you like, something unspoken, always on the look out for others. Like others, I was always working hard – never stopping really. There were plenty of times for laughs though as you'd guffaw hilariously at the wife-swapping antics of the publican and his missus at the Saxon pub etc.

Initially though a few miners'wives suspected me coming from middle class parents of being a shitter and I felt some pressure on myself to prove otherwise. As time went by these responses evaporated and I was completely accepted. I really couldn't be anything other as I had no money and we depended solely on John's wages from the pit. I did go to evening classes at the local high school to learn various practical skills and if I did learn anything I immediately passed on my knowledge to other women in the cottages. I remember especially learning how to make corn dollies and showed anybody interested how to do the same. Although corn dollies were fertility symbols they were

also the correct farming husbandry for growing healthy wheat. Remember we lived in a rich agricultural area and there was a person in the village who knew about old farming traditions and rituals, their all round significance and how corn dolly men were until quite recently buried in the soil in the hope of ensuring a good harvest. She was able to get a class together so the tradition would not be lost. You could also make them into babies' rattles and I still have some corn dollies and I wouldn't part with them for the world. It was in a way keeping something alive of the old witches' traditions.

Although we made a family it wasn't a nuclear family as such as all of us tended to be in and out of each other's houses. In a way it was a form of looking out for each other without self-consciously been seen to do so. It simply was normal practise as for instance on summer evenings we'd all play cricket with dustbins –mums, dads and kids. People were perpetually staying with us too. Our door was always open, our table with always room for one more and our home the one to host parties.

Truth to tell though, our family life had hardly ever been conventional. In a way we'd always been affected by the alternative life style coming out of the 1960s enhanced considerably by the fact John and I performed folk music and the like in pubs and parties. We redefined this new experience for ourselves though firmly anchored in work at the pit. I remember the long, involved walks and talks I used to take with John as we'd end up in a field on a summer's night and lie in the grass for ages looking up at the stars and naming the constellations. Or else talking so much in bed that he'd nearly be late for his shift and I had to shoo him to

work. Inevitably the kids were brought up in an open, unrepressed way, which during the strike ensured they could share their home and lives with people from all over the world.

In these terraces the close relationship with the pit was overwhelming. When on nightshift it was regular practice for our John to lock us in making sure we'd be safe. In any case it was always easy to make contact. While pregnant with Sarah each evening he left me with a torch. His apprentice worked at the time higher up in the structure of the winding gear and was thus able to see if I flashed a torch from my bedroom window so John was able to come straight home if anything was amiss. More often the close relationship became one of fun. The loud pit tannoy system was going off all the time usually management issuing instructions or requesting things. The voices to this day still ring in my ears. It was easily accessible though by miners and diverted for other uses. John would sometimes get hold of it and say over it: "Night night Sweetie ". It was quite common too for the whole pit yard to break out into loud and lusty song as someone would start off with a pop tune, old blues number or even a hymn from the Methodist chapel repertoire and everybody would follow. William Blake's powerful poem "Jerusalem" which later became a hymn was very popular.

Women too were accepted into the work environment at the time and it wasn't difficult to walk into the yard and have a chat with your fella. Sometimes this acceptance was pushed to delightful extremes. Local pits then also employed people who weren't as bright as a button. They of course were only allowed to do surface work like simple, repetitive tasks in the tub

shop where they helped fill the tubs but it gave these people a sense of their community worth as well as self worth by being absorbed into the workforce where they were shepherded, shielded and encouraged. One such guy at Kiveton pit was called Shane. As a young lad he had become spell bound by the Alan Ladd western – as indeed had many another existentially inclined northern lad fancying himself taking on single-handedly all the corrupt powers that be. Our Shane though didn't just passionately watch the film – he became convinced he was a cowboy! He'd go to work in his Stetson hat with spurs strapped on his boots and toy six guns hanging from his belt. During breaks for snap (food) he'd spend the time perfecting his quick draw techniques. Then one day Shane landed himself a girlfriend who like himself was also rather simple. She insisted on always being by his side – stuck like glue – and went to work with him bringing out his lunch box during meal breaks. This was initially accepted but the Health and Safety Executive was beginning to acquire teeth and finally management asked a foreman to deal with 'the problem'. The foreman went up to the odd couple and quite nicely suggested the lass should stay home and cook for her fella there. Shane's response was to draw his six guns and in his put-on southern American drawl demanded: "Get yer hands off ma'woman". Shaking his head the perplexed foreman backed off as everybody else collapsed with laughter. Seeing authority could make no headway it was left to fellow workmates – like John – to benignly explain to Shane why he couldn't carry on like this.

Although in these PC times it is easy to be critical of using terms like 'simple' and indeed these people were

a constant source of benign amusement to their fellow workers, in many ways it was far more tolerant than what takes place today where those with 'problems' are loudly proclaimed by the media only to be almost completely dismissed and ghettoised in the real workaday world. We grew up in less repressive times!

Street parties and festivities were regular events and we always loved preparing them. The times generally though had a radical temper to them and come Princess Diana's wedding in the summer of 1981 we decided to hold something of an anti-monarchy type event although we didn't name it as such. It wasn't as though we perceived the celebration as 'radical' like that we just did it for the extra fun. In fact we all tended to believe what we read in the newspapers or watched on TV. Despite the combative history of the miners we were law-abiding and thought the police were there basically to help us and generally the village Bobbies were OK and most had family who worked in the local pits.

The anti Princess Di party was great. We all got together and made big mock grenadier guards with busbies and the lot which we stuck on top of the big back wall fronting the main road through Kiveton. I also decided we should make a number of humpty dumpties to stick on the wall for all the little kids to enjoy. In the evening benches and pews from the local Methodist chapel were pulled out across the terraces and we all had a whale of a time lit up by hundreds of candles in jam jars as we were entertained by a folk group with guitars, fiddles and penny whistles. Some miner also prepared an especially strong elderflower sherry or champagne, which tasted beautiful. My abiding, joyful memory is seeing lots of pensioners completely legless

singing away as they sat or nearly fell off the chapel pews.

This then is a cameo of our lost community and when the miners' strike broke out under the slogan of "fighting for our communities" this is precisely what we were fighting to retain: a way of living far better, honest and humane than the emptiness, separation, isolation and "the lonely crowd" syndrome inducing generalised paranoia which modern society had increasingly been embracing since post war reconstruction in the late 1940s. As work and our living quarters were virtually inseparable no wonder we were to fight with such ferocity for something really well worth preserving. It wasn't as though it was old fashioned and backwards. It wasn't set in aspic as on the contrary during the strike many of us instantly were made to feel at home in the new though similarly warm communities like the squatters, punks or gay movements even though the reality of family or work ties here were virtually non-existent.

The miners' subsequent defeat though was to pretty much mark the end of all vibrant community no matter what its makeup, old or new. The distinction became rapidly academic as all that pulsated with life rapidly caved-in to the pursuit of money, status, buying homes, shopping and acquiring commodities in general. On the empty spaces where the steel works in Attercliffe in Sheffield once stood, the mighty consumer emporium of Meadowhall was built – a funereal headstone if you like to the miners. Although I've never been able to stomach visiting it I've come to regard it as purgatory; a place where I fancied you were forever thrown in if you'd been bad in your life. A resting place for scabs.

Imaginative survival tactics

BECAUSE we knew the strike was shaping up to be a long one, we women almost naturally got together to sort out means and ways of survival, organising food distribution, community kitchens etc. Seeing I'd always had to penny-pinching I quickly got involved in fund raising and finally stepped-out to literally meet the big wide world for the first time in my life. It meant continually leaving my family and again I only hoped in future they'd understand I really had no choice.

From July 1984 strike all miners collected a weekly food parcel. It was the same amount of food regardless of whether you lived by yourself, with your parents or had a family to support. Although on the surface this appeared unfair it was organised on this perhaps too strictly an egalitarian level because it seemed the only way at the time that arguments could perhaps be prevented when the over-riding need was to maintain a simple unity on as many levels as possible. The food parcel usually contained 2 tins of beans, 1 tin of tomatoes, one tin of fruit, 16 tea bags, 4 eggs, 8 oz of sugar, 6 potatoes and one onion. Periodically we'd be given some vegetables and fruit from the local market as well as gifts of tinned food from around the world especially France and Russia. I also couldn't forget the brutal way that Thatcher withheld Russian gifts at Hull docks. Like most in the village with pensioner relatives they understood the importance of sticking it out so each week they also sent food for their families. However, we were considerably better off than the single miners who weren't allowed any benefits whatsoever which sometimes had tragic consequences. While looking for strike memorabilia in my attic for this account I came

across some notes I'd made at the time mentioning Mark a single miner who had to look after his sister and disabled mother. He'd become anorexic feeling guilty whenever he ate food. In my notes I put down the following: "Local council provide free meals and one item of clothing per child. Single men receive nothing. £1 day picket money, £2 week hardship by local union". I also mentioned the DHSS was deliberately difficult with strikers' claims and there was no telephone contact "resulting in many delays causing genuine hardship". (As an aside here, I do wish in retrospect I had kept a diary and I still haven't met anybody from the village who did. Maybe all this was because involvement with the strike was completely time-consuming. Whatever, it is a lamentable gap).

On my future fund (and food) raising expeditions to London and throughout the country and abroad I would mention these things and I always listed the food parcel items as well as showing the last 4 meagre pay slips John had tucked in his pay packet before the wildcat strike broke out in the Yorkshire coalfield. I also endlessly mentioned the £16. 26 pence strike pay the family had to live on together with the £13 family allowance. Remember too, that one of the legislative acts Mrs Thatcher had recently enacted was to limit strikers' benefits cutting them by £10 per week. Many people never realised we were living on so little and such concrete examples certainly helped in getting spondoolies, food and clothes handed over to us.

Inevitably we couldn't live on these meagre rations and strike pay so we had to find other means of augmenting our survival. Of course some of us had allotments or biggish vegetable gardens but others didn't.

We quickly learnt to forage in the countryside and to nick from the farmers fields all around us. So as not to alert farmers to our nightly forays we also quickly learnt to take the veggies from the centre of the fields. Not having a dog capable of catching rabbits we resorted to snaring but there's a real knack to this old poacher's technique and John certainly hadn't acquired it because no sumptuous rabbit stew ever appeared on our table! We did however often have wood pigeon pie and stew thanks to John's Kalashnikov pellet gun and he sure was a crack shot with that.

In fact three months into the strike we were pretty desperate for the taste of real meat and not just dribs and drabs. One night four of us – 2 men and 2 women – managed to get some petrol together to power a picket's car and we headed for the Derbyshire Peaks visible on the horizons from our doorstep. We were out to get us selves one of the sheep that freely roam the moorland. By then any sheep would do – simply some old scrag-end of has-been mutton would have been delicious. If you thought snaring was an art this was brain science and for the life of us we just couldn't grab one of those goddam woollies. They were real smart and we came home empty handed.

In the late summer once scabs started appearing in the village they inevitably became a night and day target. One of them kept a hencoop on his allotment where he reared chickens. We finally managed to nail one as John crept into the coop and chopped the poor bugger's head off and as the old comment goes – "like a headless chicken" – it ran round the hen house until suddenly keeling over. Wrapping it up in a small blanket it was placed in a shopping bag and the booty was proudly

brought home. After plucking it in the kitchen – we didn't want the scab to know it was us – we looked forlornly in the cooking pot: it looked no bigger than a budgie!

Then one day there was a knock on the door. It was a young lad active in the strike. He'd managed to thieve a pig from somewhere, which he'd somehow shoved into the back seat of his car where it was squealing its head off. Then panicking he had no idea how to go on from here. Knowing I'd been to evening classes and catering college he thought I must possess butchering skills! I hadn't a clue. Nonetheless and knowing there'd be blood all over the place John had a brainwave. Our nearby chickenless scab had managed to get himself a holiday caravan at the Lincolnshire seaside resort of Skegness, so why not further insult the little scumbag by using his lawn to kill the pig? Once on the lawn and drunk out of his brain, John then cut the pig's throat. We then invented our own makeshift carvery skills and the pig got sliced up this way and that. Absolutely everything was used, the blood for black puddings (our beloved Yorkshire dish), the brains for soup, the trotters, the hide for rendered fat and crackling; simply everything! Nothing was wasted. A few days later the scab returned from his scabby holidays. We kept having a good laugh on noticing the bastard looking at his stained lawn puzzled about what had gone off!

Like many other workers we were all pretty good in our different ways at making ends meet. John had always been ace at making home brew and as the years went by, he became really excellent at producing exquisite tastes from virtually anything. He even said he could make a fine wine out of rank, sweaty socks

and reckoned we'd all enjoy it! Certainly he knew what flowers and weeds to pick from the countryside for those special flavours. One of his specialities though was tea wine and during the strike the tea leaf strainer was in constant use everywhere as he became the village tester (and taster) in chief always taking along his thermometer and gauges to test the myriad fermenting brews of wine and beer.

Well before the strike John was famous for his brewing capabilities. Although mining is really hard graft it didn't mean there wasn't plenty of space for fun and games while working. In fact larking about was often what made conditions tolerable. In any case management were nervous about coming down too hard on these diversions for fear of provoking things on a class level. It was only after the defeat of the 1984/5 strike that management were able to cut out most of this playful activity thus setting the grim reality of all work and no play that is the essence of today's nightmare conditions imposed everywhere throughout the workaday world.

Anyway, during his nightshift, John sometimes worked in the huge pit engine house packed with all the pit's utilities with pipes and cables snaking around all over the place amidst boilers, heating systems and what have you. If he could utilise the beck that flowed into Tommy Flockton's fields at the back of the engine house he suddenly realised this was a great place to set up an illicit distillery. Basically all you had to do was divert one of the big but idle copper boilers, then deftly re-route some copper tubing adding some new lengths of pipe that could be directed into the outside beck and hey ho, you had a whiskey still. Apart that is, it couldn't be whiskey hooch but it would be a mighty powerful pure

alcohol beverage! John then got as many lads in the village as possible who regularly made gallons of beer in dustbins and asked them all for a bin full of brew to pour into the huge copper boiler. Commandeering a pit wagon one night another miner drove around all the selected houses in the village collecting the beer bins, which were then emptied into the boiler. As John knew about distilling he knew the lads would be disappointed when he had to tell them most of their precious cargo would be wasted and drained off particularly all the poisonous parts at the top and bottom of the boiler. Only the middle portion of the unholy liquid could be drunk and then it was just a matter of waiting. Working on the welding and cutting of various bits of imported machinery so they could navigate the particular twists and bends of Kiveton's underground tunnels, John was able to keep an eye on the fermenting still. Finally each miner who had contributed to the scheme was presented with a big lemonade bottle of pure alcohol.

John in his drunken wisdom advised each and everyone about this lethal witches' brew. In a big flagon of ale to be placed at the centre of the table and that all assembled could pour from, he suggested merely applying a thimble full of the potion to make everybody present wildly happy and legless. Most stuck to his advice as John also stressed that you could go blind and demented on this gear. One night however, a young apprentice turned up at our house and decided to quaff a glass full and in no time at all the lad didn't know where he was. Dashing upstairs to the lavatory he went for a slash only it wasn't the toilet bowl nor was it the toilet! Instead he'd gone into my daughter's bedroom and piddled instead into a new pair of boots I'd just

bought her. From that day on the poor lad was nicknamed “piss-in-boots” (a play on words on the puss-in-boots, English pantomime character). Even today and now himself a responsible Dad the same tag accompanies him wherever he goes in the area.

It wasn't just food, beer and wine we had to vamp. Women tended to miss different things especially toiletries. I mostly missed toothpaste and washing-up liquid. In no time though we were picking up on old traditions that were nearly dead and buried as we began cleaning our teeth with soot which, as our grandparents had correctly told us, made our teeth like marble. However, as we were without essential toiletries during the strike, others would muck-in to suggest all kinds of imaginative solutions. Unlike us, the pensioners for instance could still afford to purchase daily newspapers. They would save them and cut them into squares threading each piece through a loop of strong thick wire to make rudimentary toilet paper. The same process was applied to the ends of bars of soap threaded through wire in the same way. Both worked well enough. Thus a lot of centuries old things if you like snapped back into play. Equally we again had to re-learn how to make time-honoured soups going much farther back than the early desperate conditions at the time of the foundation of the industrial working class made up of onions, oxo's and odds and ends from country plants which we daily added to yesterday's leftovers – if there were any – and which we really enjoyed. You began to inevitably wonder if you really did need all those fancy things that are the essence of modern consumerism.

We pared our life down to the minimum and learnt how to do without the necessities of modern living.

And as it was done with such joie-de-vivre and because everybody around us was up to the same thing it took on the mantle of an adventure. Having no choice in the matter why not then enjoy it? We could not afford soap powder so instead we'd run the bath, usually with cold water, and put all our clothes in it. We – me and John – would then climb in the bath in us bare feet and splodge up and down like we were at the seaside singing Rolling Stones'songs –and others – at the top of our voices. We really were getting satisfaction....It is such a good memory.....

Later during the strike we were presented at our door with a lot of cash from some fund raising I'd been involved in but I'll tell you more about that later. Suffice to say here it meant every striking family could have £50. A couple of buses were organised from strike headquarters to take us – mostly women – down to the ASDA (now Wal-Mart) supermarket at Handsworth on the outskirts of Sheffield. ASDA of course was chosen because it was the cheapest. Once inside, the first thing the women grabbed from the shelves was washing powder, soap, toothpaste and toilet rolls.

On this occasion I also recall buying half a pound of anchor butter, which was pure luxury. This was meant to occupy pride of place in a 'buffet' I later prepared in our kitchen to keep miners' families spirits up. We had a big round table in the kitchen on which we laid out the eats. Suddenly I realised that Matt, our young son, was nowhere to be found. We searched high and low but then bending down under the tablecloth I noticed this little figure squatting on the floor and in his hands was a half-eaten bar of butter. Right to this day anchor is still Matt's favourite butter.....

There was a period in the strike when money ceased to have value as increasingly a barter system kicked in. You could say swap three hours baby sitting in return for a sack full of vegetables made up of beetroots, cabbages, onions and carrots etc from a big allotment just so a young couple could take a walk through the fields on a summer's night and be alone under the moon and stars. John would swap his excellent home brew and he was really brilliant at sharpening knives. Life went on no matter what and for the babies born there was a communal shawl that I've still got though it's wrapped in tissue paper to protect it. Our miners'wives group managed to conjure up one wedding dress which constantly was adapted for all sizes of women whether thin, fat or tall.

In recounting this part of the miners' strike its core remains completely relevant because if and when another prolonged struggle ensues people collectively will again resort to such stratagems and enjoy them but with hopefully a happier future.

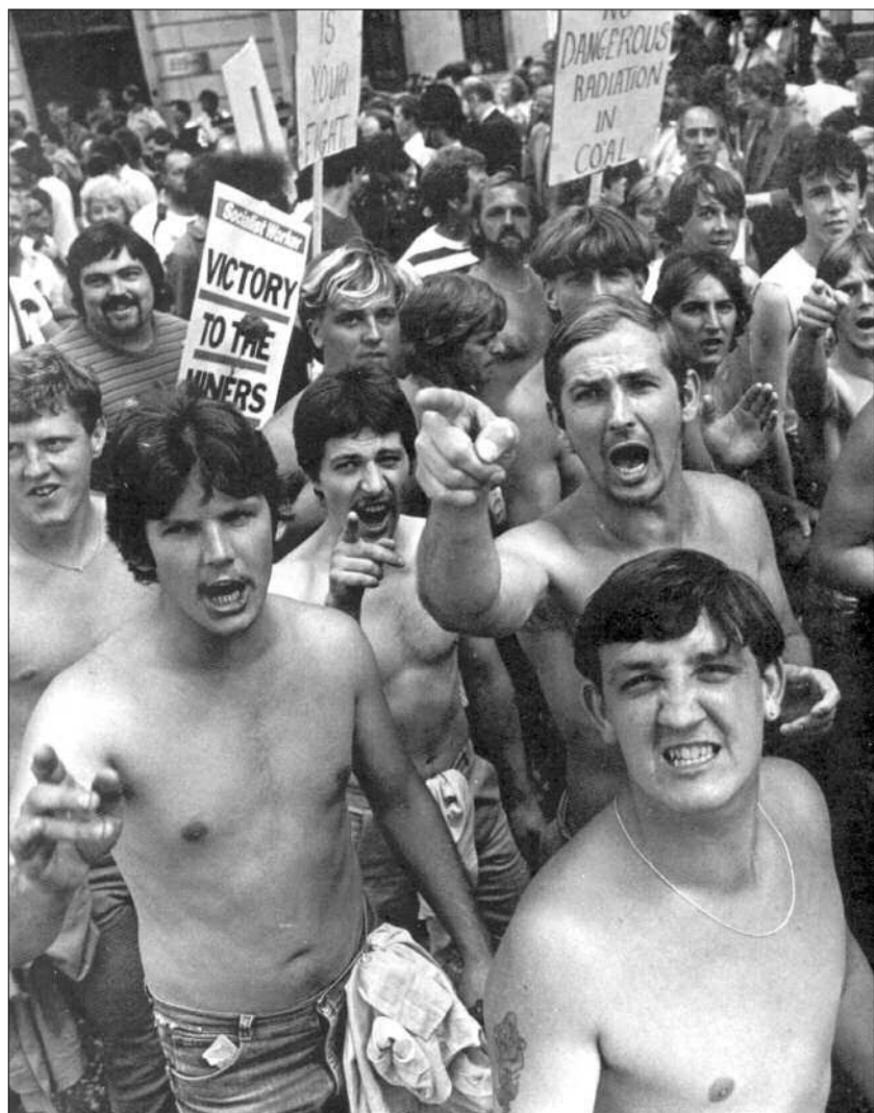
As a final aside to all this in and around the village people would come up trumps in the most unusual ways. Our GP was one. During the early part of the Second World War as part of the government's energy strategy, Ernest Bevin, the Minister for Labour and former TUC boss, knowing there was only three weeks supply of coal left, immediately conscripted 50,000 able-bodied young middle class men to go down the pits. They weren't officially demobbed as miners until 1948 to avoid them flooding the ailing job market. They were to become the famous Bevin Boys. Many of these lads were changed for the better by their experiences as they confronted the agony of

accidents and death in the pits and ever after have tended to be sympathetic to the miners. The well-known actor, Brian Rix of Whitehall farces fame was one of them. Surprisingly (or not surprisingly really) a fair number of them after enjoying the warmth and friendliness of the mining community found it difficult to return to their professions. They themselves had changed finding correct middle class behaviour something of an anathema.

At Kiveton Park we had our quota of Bevin Boys. One of them called Tony Collington who hailed from a leafy suburb of Manchester and had trained to be a doctor before war service simply couldn't leave our village. He became our GP but one with more than a difference. In the meantime Tony had become brash, outspoken, upfront and very unconventional. In fact he remained so unreconstructed he probably would



*July 1984, Rossington, Yorkshire:
tit for tat – miner's wife meets scab....*



27th June 1984, London: Southeast miners demonstrating.

have been struck off the doctors' register if it hadn't been Kiveton where he practised. He was an excellent doctor though. He knew everybody; he knew all their relatives, their grandparents and their cats and dogs. He had more than an eye for the ladies and was always trying to get in miners' wives knickers and any other fair damsel who'd fall for his charms when trying out his luck! Whenever Tony Collington's name would come up John would shake his head: "Say no more, say no more" and then laugh. Once when a miner's wife went to see him because she was feeling really under the weather, Tony's typical diagnosis was: "There's nowt wrong with thee. Your problem is that fella yer married to. You don't get on with him so why not do thee sen up, get a nice perm, a sexy frock and take off to Sheffield for a reet good time. That'll cure you". She did just that! I once went to his surgery with a pain in the head. He said: "Jen'you've either got high blood pressure or a brain tumour – which do you prefer?"

In December 1984 I was again having bad headaches, probably due to stress, which many of us showed symptoms of so again I went to GP Tony. His response was typical: "Jen'there's nowt wrong with thee. The problem is Christmas is coming up and you can't afford anything for the bairns". He then opened his desk drawer revealing a wad of £10 notes. He handed me one saying: "That's for Matt and Sarah and while you are at it tell every other miner's wife in't village there's £10 for them, just come and get it". They did just that. He'd drawn out a lot more than a £1000 from his savings. That was our Bevin Boy GP and I wish there were more of them!

Back and forth: Kiveton Park to London

DESPITE all the worries – mainly domestic ones – I was immediately behind the strike getting involved in picketing and the like. Sometime into the strike I was summoned one morning to the Kiveton strike centre at the Miners' Welfare Club (the boozer in fact) on Station Rd. Albert Bowness, the local union delegate was there. Kiveton had just been on national TV news invaded by 1500 police and a woman's support group from Peckham, south London had phoned the club asking for a speaker. He pleaded with me to go to London and do what I could. We particularly needed baby food, which I well knew we were running really short of. I was petrified but Albert kept insisting saying, "Jenny, there's really no one else". I still couldn't go and just stood endlessly shaking my head. Finally – a woman's thing – I blurted it out: "Albert, I ain't got no decent knickers". I felt so ashamed as the two or three knickers I had had holes in them or were stitched and patched up and what with my matronly, smock dresses, leftovers from having babies, I didn't want to let the side down in what I thought at the time was smart London. Otherwise all I had were the men's clothes I most usually wore to picket lines. The most important thing though was the knickers! Albert had sensed what the problem was which was why I liked him because he was sensitive to women springing I think from the respectful relationship he had with his wife Anne. Indeed he'd already been saying repeatedly; "This strike will sink without the women". Albert immediately came back: "Well, I'm just off down to Emerson's shop to get thee 4 pairs of knickers to go up to London" and he duly did so purchased out of union emergency funds.

Later that day I was sitting on the train as it pulled out of Sheffield shitting purple cookies. I had a notebook with me I had intended to fill with jottings but it remained empty all the way to London. Albert had walked me to Kiveton Bridge station from the club saying, “get across to them we really need baby food and Jen’try to get as much money as possible”. These words remained ringing in my ears but my head was spinning. Instead what was going through my brain was a train ad that was all the rage on TV at the time: “Travelling Intercity like the men do. Intercity sitting pretty all the way”.

Finally I arrived at Kings Cross terminal in London and nervously walked off the train conspicuously covered in strike badges so I’d be recognised and in no time I was met by some of the women from Peckham. We immediately got on a bus and my eyes began to open wide as I looked at black people and others from all over the world. (To be sure there was a black guy who worked down Kiveton pit but to us he was always just Nigel and we weren’t conscious of the colour of his skin, as he was merely one of the lads). I was immediately aware too that some of the women who met me were lesbians. Then I was taken to the squat that was to become my lodgings. What no rent? Jeez! Moreover, in terms of wealth, London obviously wasn’t what it was cracked up to be in my fantasy and I quickly realised even on that first bus journey I was noticing people that were worse off than ourselves. I remember thinking their knickers probably weren’t as good as mine!

Encamped in a womens’commune feeling somewhat like a fish out of water or on a bicycle, in the evening sitting in a circle a strange cigarette was passed from mouth

to mouth. Paralysed with fear and sensing what it was it was simple agony waiting my turn. Was I being tested, were they trying to show me up as just a straight house-wife, or was this some type of consciousness raising and did I have potential for other things? Finally the ciggie was on my lips. I took a puff and started coughing all over and felt somewhat whoozy. Finally back home in Kiveton I told John. He laughed telling me that he'd been into "reefer madness" for ages but had never let on!

If the first night was memorable, the morning after was even more so. I awoke early and was really hungry. I think we must have eaten everything in the house the night before so a black lass and me who was living there made to go to the local shop to buy some bread and milk. It was only about 7 am but we'd only taken a few steps when some cops pounced shoving us both up against the wall and searched us for drugs even making us take off our shoes. I'd met the Met! So this was London! Getting back to Kiveton I told the lads on strike in the club. They were horrified as nothing like that happened in our village. And as we all know a month or so later these same lads were also to find out what vicious bastards the Met were.

Nothing had been really arranged by these lasses from Peckham. They just recognised an urgent need and asked me to stay the rest of the week in order to do their best to help us. We began by taking a walk through South London as meetings were spontaneously arranged off the streets at the drop of a hat – a simple walk-in in some small factory or a bus garage or going into the front room of poor peoples' houses usually or, maybe – as time went on – something slightly more organised like an upstairs room in a pub. Every half-

penny was shoved into a Quality Street sweet box and off we went again. By the time I got home my Quality Street box just wasn't big enough and everything that had been donated had been tied up in a pillowslip. When I got back to Kiveton Bridge station some strikers met me. Together we walked back to the club and I tipped the contents of the pillowslip out onto the table. Everybody's face was a picture. I had saved every bus and tube ticket and put them on the table just to be au fait with the accounts. In those first 5 days I had come back home with more than enough baby food. Then a few days later again the phone rang at the club: "We want that woman again"! Thus my strike globetrotting took off...

In this 'new' outside world all of us – men and women alike – had instantly to adapt. In different places far from Kiveton we'd bump into each other and would naturally ask what are your lodgings like are you been well looked after, etc. I remember one very young lad from the village earnestly coming up to me in London not knowing if he should eat some strange vegetarian dish served up to him nightly at a squat he was billeted at. In agony he wondered if it was safe saying, "I think they're feeding me birdseed, Jen". It was his first taste of couscous.

So back again I went to London and Peckham. Some of the girls I really, really did get along with. There was an especially delightful lunatic Scottish woman who stood by me all the time I was in London. Collecting money on a main high street she asked one guy for some change. He replied: "I've got none". "OK", she quipped: "Then I'll have the shirt off your back" And the guy did just that! The shirt ended up in Kiveton and Jimmy Mac wore it proudly for the rest of the strike.

Unfortunately, the Scottish lass had a boyfriend on heroin and when they turned up at Kiveton, John when finding he used needles, had to ask him sadly to leave – being of course no stranger to drugs himself although he laid off the hard stuff. Hilariously, at the end of the strike when we organised a thanksgiving do for all who'd helped us, the Scottish lass kitted herself out in a flowing gown crowning herself with a large sparkling tiara.....

Slowly though my confidence grew and I suppose I quickly developed some kind of way of wowing the crowds, small or larger. Basically I had to get their attention. Awareness was the real bugbear and unfortunately you became sentient to just how dumb-fuck many middle class Londoners were. Some really didn't know jack shit and how could you get the truth through to them?

I realised, as I've intimated elsewhere here, you had to give 'em stories – real life, throbbing stories. I'd often tell them what the last 3 days had been like. Going to bed tired out then having to kick John out of bed to get on that picket line. To let them know what it was like daily facing coppers leering at you. What it was like getting the kids ready for school in this unusual situation and finally what it was like being a woman in such a virtual civil war situation. I'd talk about our precious humane community in our rows of miners'cottages and just how long the Dennis'family had been there. How John's grandfather was there when the pit was sunk in 1866 and how for 52 years, George, (John's Dad) had been at the pit on his retirement to be rewarded with only a miniature version of the famous miners'safety lamp which he promptly

flung into a nearby field. Was that really all he was worth? (In fact, I secretly rescued the lamp and it remains to this day all polished on my hearth). I think I refrained from telling the audience some of the more gory details – perhaps for fear of prosecution – like how some coppers would not only wave their £20 notes at you and which some of the media had picked up on – but how some would offer you £10 for a blowjob!

In no time I realised I'd come into full contact with the most radical part of the London feminist movement and some of them were really great working tirelessly for the strike. They tended to live in squats and really weren't part of the artsy-farty owner occupiers/writers scene who had such a high profile in what I rapidly realised was the media oriented feminist circuit. They seemed at odds with each other in practical, everyday life. Some too were women separatists and I remember one of the squats had a plumbing problem and until they eventually found a woman plumber nothing moved in that dept. When telling the lads back in Kiveton their jaws dropped open!

Other feminists weren't so appealing and I rapidly came up against the middle class groups full of etiquette and snooty manners. They would for instance lay on some fancy snap when I'd been used to cabbage and onions. This having been my staple diet for months I simply couldn't digest quail eggs, smoked salmon and other delicacies and at one point I became proper poorly. This went along with many condescending mannerism, which I found irritating. One in particular really got me mad: "This is Jenny my little miner's wife"!

One meeting I attended in the south west of England really stood out. I was invited to a posh venue full of

snotty-nosed upper middle class people many sporting cut-glass accents. I turned out my usual speech – impassioned though it was – as I enumerated the difficulties and money problems we were experiencing putting in many a true personal story for good measure. I then asked the audience to make generous donations if they really felt about the plight of the miners. Then the collection kicked-off. Looking on, all I was seeing were a few coins dropped into our buckets covered with stickers supporting the strike! From feeling overawed among these posh people I exploded in full-throttle Yorkshire accent virtually calling them a bunch of mean bastards. “Coins, coins, coins, coins. How about some £5 or £10 notes? Do you know duck (pointing to a well-attired woman in the front row) what it’s like not been able to give enough snap to your bairns”? I really put the boot in pointing out how they were sitting on their arses passively identifying with the strike from a safe, cocooned distance. For sure it did the trick and the audience started coughing up the notes. Then a guy with a very smart accent stood up and said: “The gal is right you know, why don’t we do something ourselves right now”. Apart from he was saying “fuck” every other word. We in the mining community never swore like that when women were present, although again that was to change somewhat as the years have rolled by. Still you took all this on board without comment –you had to – if you wanted to get hold of the spondoolies. Anyway this posh guy said there was a lorry depot just round the corner packed with lorries deployed daily ferrying coal (from south Wales?) as part of the strike breaking strategy of the state. He suggested doing something seeing he could supply “fucking hilti-guns”.

Surprisingly, a fair amount of people got up off their seats and a bunch of us went round the corner to this depot and using the “fucking hilti-guns” wrecked the tyres and wheels of the parked lorries. Seeing the depot was in a remote country district there was also no security! At the end of the night I felt right chuffed knowing the scabs would take time to recover from this deserved pasting.

The Yorkshire miners – and I couldn’t help but feel Kiveton Park in particular – unlike say, the South Wales or Kent miners, weren’t very good at organising survival strategies and we often went without when with a little more effort we could have eased things considerably. I remember speaking from a stage to a big audience at Hammersmith Palais, west London after the battle of Orgreave in late June 1984. It was the biggest meeting I’d been to and I felt terrified. Stage fright didn’t come into it. Things were beginning to get desperate survival-wise in Kiveton. I thought of the family with only one pair of shoes between the Dad and his apprentice son who were both on strike meaning only one of them could go on the picket line at a time. When leaving Kiveton Bridge station for the Hammersmith trip, the son – he was called Poppy – said goodbye to me having that morning struggled finally to the picket in his bare feet! He shouted: ‘Hey Jen’, try get us shoes, not poncey ones but some trainers”. Cheeky but nice. By now some of the strikers believed I was so capable I could just do it like that and their shining believing faces said so. As I’ve mentioned previously, in between my endless stints hither and thither I was constantly on the picket line so I had all this knowledge at first hand. On stage at Hammersmith I mentioned this and then the

heckling began as some people started mocking me calling me "a drama queen" after I'd suggested that people should leave their shoes at the meeting and go back home in their socks and bare feet to see what it was like. I may be very emotional and dramatic and obviously so but this was too much. It's also something of a trait among feisty Yorkshire lasses so I snapped back: "You say you support miners, well then, leave your fucking shoes". Some did! Finally I did go back home with a sackful of shoes, even a pair of American Jordans, and between Kiveton Bridge station and the club my sack was torn apart by young miners who like Cinderella retorted: "I don't care if these shoes hurt cos' they're just great". That was this strike too; a throw back to old style poverty like the history books graphically told us amidst the modern day of style and image and the two seamlessly blending together!

This incident illustrated if you like some of the tensions and probably modern contradictions of this type of situation. Around this time some of our French friends showed John a photograph of some dapper young Spanish men done up in straw boaters, striped jackets and sporting elegant walking canes promenading for all they were worth in Brussels. A few years later two of them, Ascaso and Durrutti, now with rifles in hand were at the forefront of a profound social revolution! Let's face it even in mining areas in 1984, consumer capitalism had made far greater inroads than it had in Spain in 1936.

One further point after each meeting and this applied to Hammersmith Palais too, I'd say: "If you don't believe me you can come to stay at our house". And some did... And some are still real friends.....

Although we as a family always tended to be welcoming, throughout the strike our home became a veritable open house with few nights without visitors. At our final 'Thanksgiving' party when the strike ended there were well over 40! In the bathroom, 2 slept in the bath head to tail with 3 on the floor. Thank goodness we had a tiny lavatory that was separate. My Sarah's bedroom was turned into a girl's dormitory with 18 women sleeping on mattresses on the floor. The kitchen was left open all night where a card school was in full swing. That's also where the home brew was stashed and for two nights JD never slept. Can you imagine me cooking breakfast for 47 people with some wanting poached eggs, some fried, some scrambled – never mind all the porridge! It was real good fun.

Of course many of these people helped us out financially and became our firm friends. Equally though there was more than a fair share there for the ride imbibing the atmosphere while poncing for free food we had paid for but could hardly afford ourselves. 'Big' names joined the throng and you wondered just what was their angle? Jeremy Paxman, the future controversial and combative host of the TV Newsnight programme was all nice and pleasant with us even downing a bit of food. He departed late in the evening. Then about 3 in the morning John and I were woken up with a loud knock on the door. It was Paxman. Evidently he'd gotten half way down the M1 motorway to London and realised he'd left his expensive scarf. He came back all that way just to collect it! We were left simply shaking our heads at the meanness of it. Surely he could simply have left it, phoned us up and said it was some kind of donation. Him with his house now worth at

least £3 million in London's Kensington! Then there was Benjamin Zephaniah, the Afro-Caribbean poet who in 2003 handed back his MBE medal in protest over the Iraqi war. He didn't ponce but you wondered what he was doing among us. It was as though it was the in thing to be seen among the miners – essential for his radical image. It wasn't as if he cared to talk to you face to face. He'd brought his retinue with him and he was more interested in how it played with them. You could perhaps understand if he wanted to declare his solidarity with the Afro-Caribbean miners who had joined the work force – one who had been tragically killed – in a pit disaster at Lofthouse colliery near Wakefield a few years previously.

At that time in the early 1980s, the gay movement was in a considerably more open and better shape than it is in today. But there again what isn't as capitalism has invaded and derailed us on so many fronts people know longer have any sense of themselves. London Pride supported the South Wales miners though that



Autumn 2004, Armthorpe, Yorkshire: the local welfare miners' club.

didn't mean they didn't look elsewhere. The squat scene overlapped with so much of the contemporary musical charts that along with the gay ingredient, it was hardly surprising I quickly met up with post punk bands especially Bronski Beat and Jimmy Somerville. I hadn't a clue who they were but Jimmy was always nice to me, respectfully calling me Mrs Dennis even though they were number 1 in the bleedin'hit parade. The band said they'd be delighted to give a gig in aid of Kiveton and then come up and see us at the club. Back in Kiveton I told the club/union secretary about this and he replied: "Never heard of 'em. They're obvious wankers wanting to get in on the ticket"! I went on to say that Bronski Beat had said they'd pay for everything so we'd have no expenses we could ill afford. He was finally only convinced when a number of miners' young teenagers, including our Sarah, scornfully mocked his blinkered un-hip take on the contemporary scene. And on this level, kids know best!

One famous weekend a group of gays who had attended one of my London meetings turned up and the band got out giving us all the money they'd earned from their gig. They were all done up in lipstick with fishnet stockings and high heels. They were full of themselves and full of fun too and just bounced into the miners'-club. It was the evening and in no time things just started flowing as big butch miners were all dancing with the lady boys, loving every minute of it. It was ace and I just loved it too. For hours upon hours it went on and on through the night. In the club among the miners it all started out with: "I'm fucking well not dancing with a lady boy" but then a few hours later it was: "I want to dance with your lady boy" and really mean it!

Journeying to the ends of the earth – or so it seemed!

WHILE in Peckham I met some Punks from Holland all done up with their spiky hair dos with safety pins through their noses and so on. They wanted to get involved on the picket lines so I told them to go up to Kiveton giving them our address and off they went. John didn't know they were coming nevertheless he opened our door to them and said: "The house is yours" and he took them on the picket lines everyday for a week while I remained in London. The strike produced new roles all the time depending on what you were good at or what previously hidden capacities it brought out in you. We were noted for our open friendliness. John especially was very amenable and amiable and in a way, we became hosts for the village – if you like – the strike's lodgings at number 14, Ivanhoe Avenue. Strangers were sent there from all over the world.

As soon as the Dutch punks returned home they were on the blower to us asking me to go to Holland on a fund-raising trip. The union office then intervened saying they wouldn't let me go abroad by myself. I protested as by now I was becoming more confidant and the strike was really begin to transform me as a person. I got mad insisting I wanted to go abroad by myself. The union was adamant and declared I had to go along with Albert. What about the cost though? Ingeniously this was solved as Persil soap powders at the time were awarding a two for the price of one deal if you collected enough Persil coupons off packets of soap powders. Again the pensioners came to our aid and we soon collected enough coupons and off we went, Albert travelling on a Persil coupon.

Initially it was all rather embarrassing as I'd never been away with another man before. Despite all my recent personal breakthroughs, nonetheless I was shy and tongue-tied and didn't know how to hold a conversation with Albert. Again, Albert with his usual sensitivities towards women picked this tremor up and broke the ice by telling me about bridle harnesses. Intrigued as to what they were I got absorbed in his story as he explained he'd been on aircraft carriers during his stint in the RAF and the great slings that steadied the aircraft as they took off and landed and which I'd seen enough of at the cinema or on TV were the bridle harnesses and after this things got easier and easier between us.

The punks at Rotterdam harbour met us and they immediately took us to our spacious lodgings in, of all places, a disused city brothel! It was brilliant staying in this brothel though my real problem and a source of embarrassment to me, was that I had to sleep, albeit in separate single beds, in the same room as Albert. The Dutch being so broad-minded rightly hadn't even considered this. And in no time my fears evaporated. The brothel didn't bother me in the slightest as the prostitutes and working girls were all behind the miners' strike including the bisexuals, the transvestites and the queens. One night three of the proper queens attended to my needs with one manicuring my fingernails, another my toe nails while yet another brushed and pampered my hair. It was so gloriously sensual and I just loved it. Another night in the brothel a pet mouse race was organised. One of the mice was called Thatcher and we placed bets on the mouse to lose! Albert thought the place was wonderful too though he never knew where to put himself.

Fascinated as we were by all the places we visited including Amsterdam and Utrecht neither of us could ignore that the port of Rotterdam was shipping scab coal into Britain. Albert sussed out that security was lax and the harbour walls weren't watched as we went down to the wharves where all the coal was stored in big heaps placed there by huge caterpillar loader & dumper trucks. We pointed it out to some of the young kids we went with and during the following night a big dumper was mysteriously pushed into the harbour. The young lads certainly got things rapidly sussed out too! They were excellent. Over the next few days this action was headlines on the Dutch news broadcasts and perhaps this helped in raising more money that we expected.

As the strike continued more and more I was rarely at home although I sorely missed my children. I really got totally knackered from these excursions and was so bloody glad to be back home made all the better knowing John was just waiting for me to return. The reality was that John loved me better than ever and our passion for each other became intenser highlighted by this extraordinary situation of a social civil war. It was brilliant even though circumstances had also created an extraordinary role reversal too. Previously John saw little of his children simply because of shift patterns and sheer hard work. The strike meant our children forged bonds with their Dad they never would have had if it hadn't been for the strike. John was simply lovely with the "babbies" as I still called them even though they were really growing up and John quickly found where the hoover lived.

John was also on hand to take all the telephone calls. At the beginning of the strike my Dad, even though initially not too sympathetic to the strike, agreed to pay the line rental although fearful the line was tapped by the governments secret police (it was) requested we didn't make outside calls in case the state might use indiscretions in fabricating evidence or gleaning information helping incriminate us. In fact on the phone we always tried to be as careful as possible and were always cagey about giving out information. However as though who've experienced a similar situation it never quite works out like this in practise and no matter what you always get your security lapses. Nevertheless our phone was constantly ringing with people contacting us not only from most UK cities but also from Ireland, Spain, Germany and most of the rest of Europe and Australia. The Americas soon followed in their wake.

One day a guy called Luke phoned from Switzerland asking us if we'd come to Basle. Somehow, this Swiss youth had got our phone number in London. A few days later Luke turned up on our doorstep sporting a ladybird haircut, his head shaved and dyed black with red spots. He was with a few other young Swiss people. They had a big pot with them which one of their Mam's had made up for them full of different Swiss cheeses to be melted which we all dipped into. It was our first experience of fondue. It tasted smashing. Then these young lads and one lass went on the picket lines for a few days. Before his departure Luke made an arrangement with me asking if I could make a regular report on the strike for Sunshine Radio set up in Basle. It was then played live to a Swiss radio audience.

Little did I realise at the time but I'd made contact with the Swiss autonomous movement based mainly among young apprentices, though the unemployed and students were involved, who'd made such waves and had recently rioted in so many Swiss towns. In turn, the Italian Spring of the late 1970s had influenced them. Radio Sunshine was in fact based on its more famous predecessor, Radio Alice in Bologna that had been closed down by the Italian state. I was only able to make these connections later through others explaining a bit of recent history to me. I'd of course got a lot to say and I didn't mince matters. By then it was August 1984 and we'd really got the scabs going in though they weren't turning over coal merely sitting in the canteen doing nowt waiting for tainted money from management. The infamous "Silver Birch" (an ageing apology for a real miner whom we referred to as "Dutch Elm disease") was doing his dirty work and thus applauded by the media. On the Swiss airwaves I gave 'em hell along with the police, Mrs Thatcher, the TV and everybody else who was against us.

Finally I journeyed to Switzerland for ten days. My, oh my, how things rapidly change for the better on so many levels when a real insurrection is unfolding daily! On arriving in Basle I ended up at the Sunshine Radio station only to find a queue of people outside the building wanting to talk endlessly about the strike. This time my lodgings weren't a squat or a brothel but a Swiss trade union rest home situated in Alpine scenery where I slept under the biggest quilt I'd ever seen.

We travelled around the country from Basle to Zurich and Lausanne stopping off at smaller places all the way. One such place was Zug just beyond the top

end of Lake Lucerne. In the centre of this rather sleepy town was a statue, which made me mad of a woman with a big wicker hamper strapped to her back. Local legend had it this woman when living everyday collected her drunken husband from the local bier Keller and carried him home in the big wicker basket represented in the statue. Such menial praiseworthy devotion to the louse had obviously appealed to the burghers of this town. By now though I'd become well suss about



*Jenny speaks in Switzerland during a demo
in support of the British strikers:*

"In a traditionally male dominated area men acknowledged women's role and openly admitted without our support in presenting a solid front they would not have been able to continue, witnessing the changing attitudes and political awareness of women. We can never return to the status quo."

such insults and together with some local women we graffitied this insulting monument to imbecility. I was gob smacked to find out that in one Swiss Canton women still weren't allowed to vote. Interestingly and as it so happens, Mrs Thatcher – that distorted and insulting expression of women's emancipation and which is about all we can expect from the state – had a holiday home in Zug. There was a coal merchant in the town and one night we loaded up a wagon full of coal from the merchant's spacious yard and dumped it in the driveway of Thatcher's dwelling. It made the national headlines.

I'll never forget this fundraising in Switzerland. Just before going on the platform of a packed meeting I was horrified to discover I'd been labelled a 'terrorist' in the Swiss national press. Obviously this had all to do with the Sunshine Radio broadcasts and the police were really monitoring the rebellious youth movement there. Fearfully I got up to speak to the audience wondering if I was going to be arrested by the police and banged-up for months. Would I see my children again? Tears welled up. I never really relaxed though until I left Switzerland. Later it caused me to reflect how the authorities worldwide are prepared to use the terrorist epithet to criminalise all dissent at the same time as they covertly encourage terrorism everywhere. It's now greater than ever.....

One day about a month after I'd returned home from Switzerland there was a knock on our door. I opened it to find some clean cut suits with brief cases on our doorstep. Gulping I nearly panicked thinking they were Rotherham council officials perhaps trying to stop our rent allowance or if not that, certainly out to do us

harm. They were however immediately too polite and courteous for Rotherham council. The suits smilingly explained they'd come from Basle and stepping inside they opened their briefcases and poured piles of cash money on our table. I rorred and rorred* with tears of joy. To me it just looked like pinched money and I'd never seen so much in my life. Immediately the lot went down to strike headquarters and was distributed throughout the community for shopping as previously explained.

The media, picketing, scabs and the police

ALTHOUGH throughout the strike we rapidly learnt not to trust any of the media and from then on and for the last 20 years we've hardly believed a word on TV or in the newspapers, nonetheless the *Daily Mirror* – if you like the Labour party paper – despite being all over the shop about the strike, organised buses to take miners' kids to the seaside. It was called: "Miners' kids free passes for the Pleasure Beach".

Kiveton Park got a bus too but then heartbreak as only 52 kids could have seating accommodation. We had no choice but to put all the kids' names in a hat. Fortunately my two, Sarah and Matthew, were selected. The *Daily Mirror* organised supervision, that meant no strikers' or parents could be involved which I guess neatly fitted in with the sitting-on-the-fence attitude of the paper and wouldn't offend Labour leader, scabby Neil Kinnock, etc. At the end of a glo-

* "Rorring" is a northern expression which means something bigger and more heartfelt than crying (publisher's note).

riously sunny day Sarah wrote in the sand: "Thank you *Daily Mirror*". The following day it was the front-page photograph of the newspaper. I wrote back to the *Mirror* and thanked them on behalf of my children and the letter was published in the letters' page. I then forgot about it until a fortnight later I received a kind reply from a Mr. Palmer from Blackpool saying he wanted to support a miners' family. He'd written the letter in exquisite italic script. Every week after that Mr. Palmer would send us a long letter together with postal orders plus drawings and photos for the kids. It turned out Mr. Palmer was a poor pensioner but the money was really for the kids although he sent me a separate postal order "to keep the house going". He insisted it was "important the kids have treats" and Sarah and Matt would then gleefully bounce off down to the Post Office's sweeties and goodies shop above the railway station.

On meeting Mr. Palmer it turned out as a young man he'd fought in the Spanish civil war between 1936 and 1939 and he wondered how it all could come to this. He told us in detail about the Spanish social revolution and both John and I felt very humble listening to his experiences. At the end of the strike all women actively involved were given a silver goblet from the NUM. I immediately handed mine over to Mr. Palmer. He kept in touch with us but died a year later.

Things by now were really getting nasty. At the beginning of the strike I went to see my Mother-in-law, Molly. Rummaging through her odds and sods she presented me with a long hatpin she'd regularly used in the miners' strike of 1926. She also gave me a dram of pepper to throw at the police horses. Thus a

long and honourable though buried tradition was reinvigorated: working class women generally of course had never really been passive. It was good advice and 50 years later the hatpin was again stuck in coppers and scabs.

Right from the word go the bridge across the railway on the road to Harthill was a constant battleground about who had control of the picket. It was also where the road narrowed somewhat and if you didn't get there early you couldn't effectively picket. It wasn't just confrontation and we played many an imaginative game in and against the authorities. One sticks in my memory. A couple of young lads got a job – a badly paid cash-in-hand job – for a few nights as bouncers in a Sheffield night club. A taxi would bring them home at daybreak or rather straight to the picket line still in their tuxedos and bow ties provided by the nightclub. These two guys were full of fun as they played on old music hall images later typified in the Oliver and Hardy silent movies – even performing a few daft slapstick stunts. The funniest moment though was when one of them – more appropriately as it so happens – deployed some of the gallows humour of a Mississippi/Louisiana chain gang and their prison guards in Paul Newman's film, *Cool Hand Luke*. Taking a slash in the hedgerow he turned towards the coppers and shouted: "I'm shaking it boss". We laughed our heads off...

It wasn't always like this. Once things started hotting up what with the scabs the police really were out to get us individually and I'll never forget the day how hour upon hour myself and John and another guy hid in a big ditch from mounted police. They never found us. There were initially so few scabs they couldn't do

any work so they just lounged around in the canteen all day. John and I decided on an ingenious plan. We managed to get hold of a loud hailer and hid in the thick and tall bramble bushes across the railway from the canteen. We'd found enough unsavoury details about them from ex-girlfriends etc to really get down and dirty. One was useless in bed, one couldn't stop wanking and "Newbould you're so smelly that's why your girlfriends kept clear of you" etc. Psychologically the continual barrage was devastating and evidently was playing havoc with the scabs' minds. Cops and management were furious as they well noted the demoralising effect we were having on their pet scabs so they sent in police dogs to get us.

As Kiveton was close to the Nottinghamshire borders, miners in the first few weeks of the strike mobilised in flying pickets and with others, descended on the Notts coalfield where mass scabbing was rampant. Although this sprang from a spontaneous desire among the ordinary strikers the targeting certainly wasn't. Much was made in the national press in late spring 1984 of the outta control hooligan behaviour occasioned by the 'invasion' of Nottinghamshire but it really wasn't like that. The central headquarters of the NUM in Barnsley – that quaint turreted Victorian castle-like building near the town centre – was the centre of the operations. The high command of the NUM conducted these operations with an iron fist allowing little independent initiative on the local pit level. Sealed envelopes containing orders were sent out in Yorkshire to the loyal local troops stationed at individual pits from midnight onwards courtesy of dispatch motorbike riders. The envelopes were opened by local union

branch secretaries during the middle of the night and assembled strikers were ordered to go in cars, vans etc, to particular places in Nottinghamshire – Worksop, Ollerton, Bevercotes etc. No discussion took place on this level – knowing the feeling there wasn't much need for one anyway – and the strikers dutifully obeyed Barnsley union headquarters. Recently it would seem what is left of the once powerful NUM has tended to re-write history by saying their aim all along had been to picket coke depots, coal transport facilities, coal wharves and power stations etc. and not the scabs. What happened was that one day – two and a half months into the strike or so – out of the blue, the union changed course discouraging confrontation with the scabs just at the moment this tactic was meeting with some success with more than a few turning turtle and coming belatedly out on strike.

Although these types of orders issued on picketing like edicts making it look as though the strike was conducted in a monolithic way, this characterised more the earlier stages of the strike. As more and more people got motivated and took all kinds of individual initiatives without much consultation from anybody, the union, or more particularly the local branches tended to go with the flow and with all these new, added ingredients seemed to dissolve into the wider movement. Thus our strike headquarters was the local NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) as it was the drinking club (if you could afford it although home brew tended to be its main liquid and a not for sale asset) as it was for all other locals, as it was where supporters initially headed for, as it was also a venue for gigs, parties and having a good time. The women too made an enormous differ-

ence particularly the way the transforming momentum transformed us ourselves in individually different ways. It even penetrated right up to the Barnsley central command. I'll never forget a group of women going to see Arthur Scargill in his bungalow near Barnsley over something concerning us. He opened the door and ushered us in saying: "You must excuse me but I'm ironing" and proceeded to talk to us all while ironing his shirts! Yet this was the man portrayed in the media as a dictator or as in the case of *The Sun*, in a bad pun, as "Mine Führer." Sure we all collapsed in a fit of giggles once we left. Yes, Scargill was a bureaucrat and not at the centre of struggle like we were but he had a way with him that grabbed people which the media deliberately covered up – not only the house husband but the stand-up northern comedian on Blackpool pier – a characteristic JD rated whilst criticising his chauffeur driven car.

It wasn't so easy picketing for a mother with young kids, up at 4 a.m. for the early picket once the scabs went in, then back home to send the kids to school, then down to the strike centre to make parcels and help with individual strikers problems. I also took part in demonstrations or assemblies when bailiffs were coming to shut off gas and electricity supplies where sheer weight of numbers could force them to beat a retreat. I have pleasant memories of all the men farting on picket lines as they'd just rolled out of bed and headed on down the road. No pomp and circumstance here. Later, between mid-May and mid-June, the set piece battle for the Orgreave coking plant situated between Kiveton and Sheffield commenced. Seeing it carried on day in and day out I gradually became part

of the canteen staff ensconced in the cricket club on the playing fields just off the Old Retford Rd at Orgreave. I always tended to be busy preparing food here. On the day of the real big battle on the 18th of June 1984 when police moved in en masse I never even realised what a massacre was taking place until men covered in blood turned up in the cricket club. Details like that you cannot forget...

Orgreave meant our hatred really built up for the police on returning to the Kiveton picket. The nearby pit yard was where the coppers had parked their prison vans. The pit canteen had been taken over by them though they used the now famous heritage-listed clock-tower as a prison. I was only successfully grabbed once and I was stripped searched by men not women. It was humiliating as the coppers were leering at you making much sexual innuendo. In any case the coppers when confronting the picket even though there were plenty of women present would regularly get their willies out and piss towards us. This was usually the tactics deployed by the London Met and it created friction between different county constabularies especially those from Devon and Cornwall who were horrified at such behaviour. Indeed the inspector from Devon and Cornwall actually brought two pairs of his own shoes to give to the pickets at the pit gates.

It was however precisely their vicious and brutal behaviour that was really effective and helped militarily win the strike for the police. Some of the cops would literally stoop to anything. We'd regularly note how some of them relaxing in their deluxe buses would be watching hardcore porno films out of their heads on all kinds of drugs. This image in itself was a precursor

if you like in microcosm of what society would become everywhere with the defeat of the social movement: a sexually promoted brutalised future with no scope for tenderness, love or caring. However, after days and weeks on the picket lines surrounded by an almost universal hatred in every passer-by' eyes, you must understand the coppers had become more than incensed, they'd gone insane. They actually rode a horse into our small paper shop allegedly pursuing pickets even though the shop was too small to even turn a horse around in. They then had a devil of a job getting out but the police couldn't any longer see logically.

A similar behaviour was apparent in local prisons when we'd visit our lads banged up there. I'll never forget going to see poor old Albert as he'd finally been nicked and carted off to Lincoln jail. Being Xmas, a local market trader had given a sackful of mixed nuts to be shared on the picket line. The police found them in the boot of Albert's car and claimed they were to be used as weapons against the horses. Albert was charged and given three months in prison. I'd cooked a whole load of food, pies and other things. The prison officers took off the lid from my food box and green-gossed all over my cooking, gleefully delighting in their vicious spite. Like the police they'd also become sick in the head. I was devastated and as soon as I was out of their sight I cried my eyes out. What a thing to do to a man. Shortly after the defeat of the miners, Albert died his grief compounded by a tragic accident when his home was accidentally set on fire and one of his beloved daughters was burnt to death...

Sometimes, even then, the coppers were subtler though just as devastatingly underhand. A few had

been instructed to get hold of little children and promise to buy them sweets, ice creams and lollipops if they'd give them a few details about their parents. Many of the kids in their innocence would fall for this ploy. My son Matt, a 7-year-old kid, along with his mate was asked about our movements. He got his ice cream and sweets all right then promptly ran off home telling the coppers to sod off. I'm proud of him for that.

To this day the police are hated in the former mining areas with a gut hatred as raw as ever in confrontations that hardly ever make the news except when things really get out of hand. Thus a spate of cop car burnings early in the summer of 2004 in the ex-mining village of Goldthorpe somewhat to the north of us got on local news and was attributed to the strike.

You can't though write about the police occupation of the villages without mentioning the scabs. They danced a vicious tango together. Inevitably, the world over, scabs are hated by their workmates. This feeling has always been particularly intense among the UK miners and the *Dirty Blackleg Miner* – a song originating in a Northumberland miners' strike during the late 19th century – is perhaps the most savage folk-song ever as it is an open incitement to kill scabs. Scabbing during the epic 1984/5 miners' strike was altogether – if it's possible to be so – of a different order. The scabs weren't just in the pay of management as in the past, they actually brought about the end of our communities, the coal industry and the end of ours (and ironically their) way of life. Myopia is too mild a term for their evil crimes. No wonder most scabs have been forced to remain as vicious, heartless, vindictive creatures and as psychotically insane as the



*September 1984:
police on our backs in Kiveton Park.*

police were during the strike. Many are armed and keep their hunting guns handy just in case someone takes justice into their own hands. Hatred for the scabs twenty years on hasn't diminished. A couple of months ago, an ex-miner celebrated his sixtieth birthday and invited a lot of his former workmates to what he hoped would be a good do in the pub. He'd been a scab albeit one that went in late in the day. Nonetheless, many of his old workmates never turned up to his celebration. He went home and hanged himself.

More recently, a few months ago in fact, there was a bitter argument between a scab and a striker – Keith "Froggy" Frogson – at Annesley Woodhouse in north Nottinghamshire. It got violent and the striker was killed. Before being finally arrested, the scab for weeks hid in Sherwood Forest and the police search even got on national TV news. The striker's funeral turned into a huge event with hundreds of people turning out from all over to honour him. As for myself, I still bristle up whenever I pass a scab in the street. Earlier in the year I attended a meeting protesting the proposed phasing out of care attendants for old people, a typical cost cutting exercise Rotherham council regularly tries out in the hope we get tired of responding. A scab from 1984 got up to say his bit more or less justifying the council's proposals. If anything, he was even more stupid, cocksure and arrogant than ever. In a way this is hardly surprising. Though this apology for a human being was axiomatic in destroying our community, it is their world all right, as the essence of a scab – knifing comrades, neighbours and workmates in the back – is the very essence of our free market society.

Friends and a resume

IN PARTICULAR here I must mention certain individuals who were exceptionally helpful as well as being tremendously clued-in theoretically in cutting through the crap. The autonomous French grouping, Os Cangaceiros were one such as were radical individuals such as Nick Brandt. The latter was particularly generous with his money as well as participating in creative episodes. For instance, for Xmas for the strikers' children he told me he asked smart London shops for donations to the miners' strike and those that didn't him and his mates would rip-off blind. Mind you, even those shops that agreed also were shoplifted but it didn't really matter as they had more than enough in this society of raging inequality. Thus all kinds of goodies were delivered to us. I remember Nick brought up smoked salmon which miners responded to by jokingly declaring: "What's this – uncooked fish caught off Bridlington pier" as they gobbled it up like there was no tomorrow!

Bit by bit throughout the strike you gradually became aware how a lot of the strike's supporters saw the struggle – if not as their own – but as if their lives somehow depended on its outcome. In a sense as the strike went on and on, you realised our struggle was a struggle for the whole of society although not realising this sharply until much later – even years after the event. You were also aware of how some young people from the upper echelons of society were hungry for your reality experiences and latched on to you as a form of surrogate life – sometimes giving you survival money as payment for feeding off your life. For a while this type of thing was OK but as the darkening years unfolded after the bitter defeat marking the end of the

miners near civil war, it often felt like a leeching on your body, like you were being sucked dry by some vampire as increasingly some of them more and more criticised you for your inadequacies – even looking for all your Achilles heels – possibly because you hadn't saved them from their upper middle class predestination which they had professed to loathe so much. It finally really pissed you off.... it was like you were merely actors in some real life soap opera – a situation they peered into only to tick you off – then to withdraw back into their own rarefied, privileged world – until the time came to tick you off all over again when they needed some extra oomph in their empty lives!

The emphasis here must be placed though on the darkening years and the responses of different individuals. If we'd won everybody would have reacted in far more amenable, communitarian and understanding ways. That is apart from the real powers that be who would have been in a state of complete panic and which all of us, bar none, would have relished.

Remember as a final resume of what I've written here, the defeat of the strike cracked nearly everybody apart who was engaged in trying to bring about its triumph. Cracking up so often brings out all our ugliest aspects and nobody wishes to come near for fear of being infected. The might of the system destroyed our ways of behaving and functioning in everyday life right down to the simplest of levels. We literally didn't know where to turn for succour. It was as though we lost all our past referentials. We couldn't go back but neither could we go forward. We lost a mighty strike only to become lost to ourselves. Nobody could keep any inner coherence together as we began to make

crazy personal mistakes. Only yesterday we were the pole of attraction throughout the world and now we were nothing. Yesterday everybody wanted to meet us now nobody did and in a way we were used and spat out by the media as some sad story in yesterday's news. We were floundering all over the place prey to so many outside forces that weren't our own. We were forced to submit to the increasing reign of money terrorism when money was the last thing we'd got. Losing our famed practical communitarian common sense we became exposed to the cold as charity's array of the state's social services with its new army of up-to-the-minute therapists telling us how to 'live' and "move on" – as the idiotic catch phrase goes – and when you are heartbroken the last thing you can do is move on! These individuals merely tried to impose middle class forms of psychologising on us snootily clueless as to our own more enlightened, humane ways of doing



18th May 1985, Edinburgh: miners national march for the release of their jailed comrades.

things. Most of the time they positively damaged us. For these berks that was 'the past'! After such defeat it takes a long, long time to get your life back on some kind of even keel and many's the one who has been unable to do so.

As for me, like many others who'd been through the strike I tried university and studied sociology at Sheffield and then took a teaching degree at Huddersfield University. True we could do it and a reasonably large proportion of unemployed, desperate people got degrees though most didn't pick up a career from it. Later I was to sadly compare my university experiences with my earlier evening classes when I learned how to make things like corn dollies. The latter was something I could put to practical use with other people while university tended to be so much ideological hogwash having nothing to say about my living situation. On top of this 'new life' our real lives fell apart, our marriages, relationships and families broke up as all connecting links that kept our community vibrant were smashed to smithereens. Every living thing that couldn't be turned into a commodity was stolen from us – most of all our ways of behaviour and what was in our hearts – a microcosm if you like for what capitalism was already doing to nearly everybody else. Our strength had been that we had resisted these unwanted developments for so long.

IN THESE REMINISCES I've tried to give some idea how the memory of the miners' strike remains very much alive in our neck of the woods. Today we are faced with the rundown of major energy resources especially oil and gas. This is irreversible. It could even be said gas and

oil extraction in the context of the UK were opportunistically sustained in order to break the social vision and example of the coal miners. It was necessary to destroy a rebellious working class here and we were at its core. In so doing power (in more ways than one) has created a dilemma for itself it cannot escape easily. Clean coal, though expensive has become a reality since 1984-5. JD was never conned we'd seen the end of coal. In the years after he'd been invalided and after the wholesale pit closure programme of the early 1990s, he well noted the huge coal barges navigating the Trent and the Aire/Calder navigation direct from the Rotterdam spot market. He often said a new generation of coal miners would have to be trained and he wouldn't be there to enlighten them! In the present circumstances – the drying up of energy resources and because renewables can only have a limited effect in that exponential rise in energy requirements under capitalism – massive amounts of accessible coal remain here which, according to 'the experts' is viable for at least 140 years. We have however become the UK's biggest trauma of industrial and working class history. We are the real unforgiven and our Pandora's box must never be re-opened. Nuclear energy is far preferable and the state will pursue this option with crazed vigour. But will the public take this lying down? There could be pandemonium and in such circumstances the state will be forced to confront its trauma over coal. Many ex-miners and the few miners that are left here are increasingly aware that this is the case and everywhere are beginning to openly and vociferously say so. Why else have new vast coal wharves (at the cost of half a billion pounds) been proposed for the mouth of the

Humber to ship in coal from all over the world? The old comment “coals to Newcastle” is still not a mere historical catchphrase and seeing world shipping is dependent on what must surely be an ever on-going rocketing cost of oil where’s even a simple cost benefit analysis going to be?

John in his last few years kept a notebook often full of reflections. He outlined some comments on The Ridley Plan worked out more precisely by the Thatcher Government after their retreat on pit closures after the miners’ wildcats in 1982 coming so soon after the great urban rebellions of inner city youth in 1981. He called the Plan: “The bluest blueprint this side of the drawing for The Titanic” put into place, “so that Capital and the global market would not be seriously threatened again in the UK”. Our defeat also became the blueprint on which has been constructed the horrendous experiment called New Labour finally aligning itself seamlessly with the American neocons in their attempts to bring about a biblical endgame apocalypse.

Let’s maybe end at the end or is it the end of a beginning? Cortonwood was the Titanic as well as The Alamo and if you remember nobody who defended the original Texan Alamo, survived. The comparisons are just too uncannily real though in a different and far more significant context. Truly, did our defeat herald a world where the boot (as Orwell said) would be pushed into the human face forever albeit a redesigned Adidas boot? The miners are dead. Long live the miners!

Jenny Dennis, Autumn 2004



August 1984, Harworth, Nottinghamshire: the world turned the right way up.



November 1984, Stainforth, near the huge Hatfield pit in Yorkshire: off the saddle goes a pig.



November 1984, a union meeting in Aberavon, Wales: a rope for hanging traitors is exhibited as the general secretary of the Trade Union Congress, Norman Willis, is about to start a speech.

The Blackleg Miner

This late 19th Century English folk song, originally from Northumberland, was popularized in the seventies by folk band Steeleye Span – and sung by UK miners during the strike to intimidate scabs.

It's in the evening after dark,
When the blackleg miner creeps to work,
With his moleskin pants and dirty shirt,
There goes the blackleg miner!

Well he grabs his duds and down he goes
To hew the coal that lies below,
There's not a woman in this town-row
Will look at the blackleg miner.

Oh, Delaval is a terrible place.
They rub wet clay in the blackleg's face,
And around the heaps they run a foot race,
To catch the blackleg miner!

So, dinna gan near the Seghill mine.
Across the way they stretch a line,
To catch the throat and break the spine
Of the dirty blackleg miner.

They grab his duds and his pick as well,
And they hoy them down the pit of hell.
Down you go, and fare you well,
You dirty blackleg miner!

So join the union while you may.
Don't wait till your dying day,
For that may not be far away,
You dirty blackleg miner!



2004, Kiveton Park: *Big Brother is watching you more than ever.*





*May 1984, Scotland: police confronting a picket line
in Hunterston, from where Polish coal
was to be transported to Ravenscraig steelworks.*

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ye who suffer woes untold,
Or to feel, or to behold,
Your lost country bought and sold
With a price of blood and gold –

Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free –

And these words shall then become
Like Oppression's thundered doom
Ringing through each heart and brain,
Heard again – again – again –

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are man – they are few.

Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *The Mask of Anarchy*

THE HISTORY of the British working classes has been punctuated by strikes, in which the miners have been the most militant, but it was the strike of 1926 that served as the reference point for the striking miners in 1984. The span and the fierceness of the 1926 strike was imprinted in their minds, and there were many things in common with both strikes that revived the spirit. Since 1920, dramatic economic crisis has suffocated the proletariat and has coincided with the decline of the working class movement which was at its peak after the victory of 1918. The miners' union at that time, the MFGB (Miners Federation of Great Britain) remained the

spearhead. For the owners of the pits – which at that time were private –, and also for Baldwin’s conservative government, the situation was propitious: through domesticating the miners who, for many years, were at the frontline of social confrontation in the United Kingdom, the whole of the working class movement could be domesticated.

Quite the same happened in 1984: it was about the Thatcher government smashing forever the working class opposition, which had seen a revival since the late 1960’s. The government attacked the most offensive section of the working class –the miners– with the expectation that the rest of society would cave in. Like in 1926, it was about making the poor civilised by imposing regulations in opposition to mob rule, and the government worked desperately hard to challenge the legality of the strike. In 1984, as in 1926, the miners were left isolated due to the lack of support from other unions, and the miners were divided by the conflict. Above all, in both cases the defeat of the miners had a huge impact on the whole of the working class movement: 1926 was the worst setback for the movement since the collapse of chartism in 1848, just as 1985 was the worst setback since 1926.

Initially, the 1926 strike was defensive, with the slogan, ‘Not a minute on the day, not a penny off the pay’(the bosses, fed up with the crisis, wanted to cut wages and raise the number of hours in a working day). On 4th May, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) ordered an indefinite general strike to show solidarity to the miners. Very soon after, the country was plunged into an atmosphere of civil war, and the more moderate union leaders within the TUC were keen to bring the radical strikers into line. The General Strike ended after nine days with an unconditional surrender. The miners felt a

sense of betrayal and continued with the strike. Despite their isolation, they kept the strike going for another 6 months before finally surrendering.

The government and the employers took out their revenge on the unions by enacting in law, in 1927, The Trades Disputes and Trades Union Act, making a general strike and sympathy strikes illegal, limiting the action of the picket line and banning public sector workers from joining the TUC. Their membership dropped from 5.5 million in 1925 to 4.4 million in 1933, while the unemployment rate steadily rose. The missed opportunity of 1926 corresponds with the crushing defeat of revolutionary syndicalism and a move away from strategies of direct action. The moderates within the TUC had won, imposing a reformist line which favoured the acquisition of power of the Labour party. In 1927, negotiations between the unions and the manufacturers defined a new style of industrial relations, based on consultation and focused on the pre-eminence of the law and the interests of the economy.

Despite their successive defeats and semi-victories throughout the entire 20th century, the miners remained, up to 1984, amongst the most pugnacious of the British working classes. During World War II, for example, when propaganda for the war effort was at its peak, denouncing anyone who grumbled at working for longer and receiving less in return, the miners were amongst the rare salaried workers to go on strike.

In 1947, the coal industry was nationalised and put under the control of the National Coal Board (NCB): it managed 980 pits employing 704,000 miners. From 1965, due to the low price of petrol, a programme of closures was launched and the number of miners plummeted from 602,000 to 252,000 working in 259 pits in 1974.

Finally in March 1984, at the beginning of the great strike, 180,000 miners were employed in 174 pits.

The miners resisted these closures with a series of strikes, of which two were national strikes, in January-February 1972 and again in February-March 1974: on this occasion millions of British workers stopped working along with the miners, causing paralysis of the nation, the resignation of the conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath and a return to power for the Labour party. Even though the miners had failed to halt the process that was eroding the workforce, they were well compensated with huge pay rises, which soon meant they were amongst the highest paid of the working classes in the country. The image in which they were portrayed was one of the 'working aristocracy', denoted above all by their legendary pugnacity. They were naturally the prime target of the Thatcher government, who came to power after 'The Winter of Discontent' of 1978-1979 (a wave of large strikes which proved fatal to the Labour cabinet of James Callaghan) and whose offensive programme, in summary, was to trample the poor once and for all.

The British economy was sick and tired of the indiscipline within the workforce. The Keynesian United Kingdom broke the European record for the number of hours of strikes. The general spirit of refusal to work expressed itself from time to time by acts of true defiance against the state, as was the case with the miners' strike of 1972. As early as the mid-1970's, the nation's wealth had secretly accelerated its exodus towards more reliable regions (South-East Asia, South America, Africa). This opening into the global market enabled the English capitalists to withdraw their investment in British industry during these difficult times. British industry had developed slowly, becoming less and less

competitive: companies hesitated to invest and modernise in a country where the workers were so unproductive and entrenched in the ancient traditions of class struggle. It was first necessary to socially pacify the nation, and this was Margaret Thatcher's mission. She set out to stamp her authority over society and put all her effort into imposing ultraliberal norms that today remains the common fate of the global economy.

The British government had long been preparing for a battle that would take place. Before their accession to power the conservatives were clear: "To face up to the threats of social conflict, the potential/possible battle would happen on the grounds chosen by the Tories, in a sector where they could win", declared Nicholas Ridley, Thatcher's future Minister of Transport. The measures that the government were about to implement had been revealed the day before the elections of 1979: they had to hoard coal stocks in the United Kingdom and abroad, convert the power stations that ran on coal into ones that could run on a mixture of coal and fuel oil, and encourage the recruitment of non-union lorry drivers.

The NCB hatched a secret plan which permitted, during the strike, the circulation of coal thanks to regular contacts with their clients (power stations, factories, ...) and hauliers. It countered the effects of the sympathy strikes held by the unions of the lorry drivers and the railwaymen. 800,000 transfers by road thus delivered 26 million tonnes of coal, that is only 8 million tonnes less than normal. The state legislated to make the picket lines ineffective: no flying pickets and no more than 6 people on a picket line, the creation of police units to target pickets and flying pickets and issue judgements on the spot and behind closed doors. For Thatcher it was also a good moment for a strike to be "instigated": in March, at the end of winter, with enough stocks to last

the two least demanding seasons for energy consumption, and to wear down the strikers' resolve...and the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers, which replaced the MFGB in 1945) fell into the trap.

In 1983, Ian MacGregor, who had restructured the steel industry, was nominated to lead the NCB and do the same job: close the pits, make the workforce redundant and make the industry profitable. He offered the unions a 5.2% pay rise in exchange for their approval of his plan. The NUM refused the offer and on 31st October called for an overtime ban, effectively stopping the pits from operating for three days per week. The national executive of the NUM was at the time headed by a kind of lifetime president, Arthur Scargill, who was close to the communist party. Many miners from Nottinghamshire ("the Notts"), usually more agreeable than miners from other areas, started a strike against the strike(!), finally forcing Scargill to organise a national vote "in the name of democracy". At this abstract interpretation of democracy, the miners responded in concrete terms: in February 1984, the overtime ban was almost total. Strikers were fighting for everyone whereas in Notts, too many miners, manipulated by their treacherous bosses * hoped, thanks to their crawling, to save their own skins.

* *The Observer* revealed in January 1985 that the NCB had been bankrolling the NUM officials in Nottinghamshire since 1947!)



Octobre 1984, Denby Grange, Yorkshire: retreating cops.

March 1984-March 1985: a year of strike

On entering the pub I said to myself: "it smells of scabs here". These guys were alone at their table, with their backs turned. They drank their beer with their noses in their glass. We drink our beer with our heads held high and looking straight ahead.

A miner from Sunderland

In mid-December 1984, we all met in a pub with the old pickets to celebrate the death of the last scab from the 1926 strike.

Another miner from Sunderland

IN FEBRUARY 1984, the Scottish miners commenced actions against the closures. Mick McGahey, the president of the Scottish NUM, refused to call for a total strike during a meeting and was roughed up. On 4th March 1984, at the announcement of the closure of their pits, the miners of Cortonwood (Yorkshire) voted for the strike with a show of hands, but the regional committee of the NUM still refused to call for an all-out strike. The federal organisation of the NUM gave permission to their bureaucrats to try and drive a wedge between the regions.

In 1982, when the Welsh came out on strike, the dithering within the local union had prevented Yorkshire from taking any action. In March 1984, it fell upon the Yorkshire pickets to move en masse to convince the Welsh. From the outset the flying pickets spontaneously organised themselves in order to spread the movement to other regions; playing an active role in its expansion, however they were not recognised by the NUM until the end of May. While the strike spread from Yorkshire to Scotland, to Wales, to Durham, to Kent, the local

unions, dominated by the right wing of the NUM (Notts, Midlands...), were opposed to the strike, and these tensions between the right and left of the national executive had repercussions upon the rank and file all through the strike, entertaining regional divisions.

From April, the conflict became more violent with acts of sabotage against many pits and NCB offices. The strikers took systematic action against the circulation of coal, notably by targeting the steel works and power stations. The NUM made agreements with the unions of the lorry drivers and the railwaymen, but the main steel union, the ISTC (Iron and Steel Trades Confederation), refused to block the steel works, which limited significantly the impact of the NUM blockade. A massive police presence was deployed in all the mining regions – literally a military occupation which would last more than a year.

It was about reclaiming the initiative against the police violence. The NUM, regarded as being too indecisive and too weak, began to crack under the pressure. To re-establish their authority, the national policy was redressed and a tougher line was adopted. The strikers wanted to fight but the NUM directed the battle on grounds that were not favourable. Mass pickets were organised in a quasi-military style by the NUM, and the battles at the coke plant at Orgreave marked the end of this first period of spontaneous agitation. From 28th May to 18th June 1984, the battle of Orgreave raged on with violence on an unprecedented scale, to which the state responded with a greater violence with thanks to the rules of engagement. There were hundreds of casualties. Orgreave was an important meeting place for thousands of people from all over the country, who established long-lasting relationships. But one has to deplore the waste of this beautiful energy on a ground controlled entirely by the state. The confrontations were

viewed as being almost Napoleonic battles by both the NUM and the government. The NUM gained a certain respect in the face of all opposition which it held onto until the end of the strike. By this manoeuvre, they did not appear to go against the flow of the movement in spite of lacking overall control.

Against the arrogance of the state and the police, it was not only the miners but the local population, who were concerned by the strike, and further afield, who rose up. From June and throughout the summer, numerous attacks on police stations reunited the miners, their communities and many of the local unemployed. The shopkeepers who served the police and refused to give credit to the strikers experienced some problems. Police terrorism in this way gave rise to (within the mining communities) a long-standing hatred for the police which still exists today and shows little sign of abating; with the exception of some "docile local bobbies", the police appeared to the inhabitants with their true face: the pigs, the enemy. From June to November, the scale of the offensive against the police was similar to the riots of 1981* (see page 118). When many workers were confused up to that time about the situation, often believing the media version of the "race" riots, the strike opened their eyes. At Kiveton Park Working Mens' Club, there was an enthusiastic spirit amongst the strikers each time they saw on the television, the London rioters attacking police buses and forcing them to retreat. As an expression of mutual recognition, many of the young people who were involved in the riots in their own areas in 1981, came to lend their support to the strikers in their villages. Faced with this collective reaction, the police instituted a state of siege in certain towns and villages.

The miners found a greater and more effective support within their own communities. So, amongst many other

examples, in Notts, some of the strikers' wives convinced the wives of non-strikers to stop doing the housework. In a village in the county of Fife, the school children left school to block the convoys of coal which were destined for Ravenscraig power station. After the intervention of the police, the initiative was reclaimed by pensioners who inflicted damage on the lorries. In Mexborough, Yorkshire, students ransacked their secondary school and agreed to strike in sympathy with the miners, after a measure was introduced to ban the punk style in schools. At the same time, local initiatives were taken by the dockers and the railwaymen in order to prevent the distribution of coal. At that point, the expansion of the conflict was crucial and would have immediately led to a general social crisis. On 9th July 1984, the dockers and seamen at Grimsby and Immingham went on strike against the recruitment of non-union personnel. Very soon 78 ports were paralysed. Thatcher threatened to deploy the army. The Transport and General Workers'Union (TGWU) and the National Union of Seamen (NUS) called for the strike, but with clear corporate demands, which enabled them to quickly negotiate with the state and call for a return to work before the detail of the agreement had been revealed. On 23rd August, the dockers in Hunterstone (Scotland) refused to unload Polish coal destined for the steel works in Ravenscraig. The unloading was made by the iron and steel workers and the TGWU had to call for a national strike the following day. This action was extended to 25 ports and half of all sea traffic was interrupted. However, on 18th September, when the movement was still at 60%, the delegates voted for an immediate and non-negotiable return to work. From then on, the quantity of coal passing through ports rose steadily.

The summer of 1984 marked the decisive turning point in the conflict. At that time, when the expansion of

the strike had seemed possible, at the end of the summer, the strikers took stock of their isolation and the relentlessness of their numerous enemies. In the mining villages the management had for a long time allowed the miners to scavenge for coal on the slag heaps. The NCB launched a new offensive from then on: they installed CCTV and recruited security workers and dogs. Any miner accused of theft, violence or vandalism was fired. The cops continually harassed the fundraisers, HM Customs refused to allow a Russian cargo ship, carrying food parcels for the miners, to unload. The state cut public aid by as much as 15 pounds per week, on the pretext that each miner was entitled to 15 pounds per week from the NUM (had the union been effectively paying these 15 pounds, its funds would have been exhausted within roughly ten days). Within the striking families, the money to survive came from family allowance and state benefits for the unemployed. But the NUM were also viewed as a provider of money. At the beginning of the strike, each striker present on the picket line was paid between 1 and 3 pounds a day, depending on the area, and the local NUM covered expenses for van rental and petrol, despite reticence at a national level. Finally, in October, and for the first time in the history of British unionism, the law courts froze the assets of the NUM, under the pretext of “refusing to abide by the decision of justice” (the strike was judged illegal because it had not been decided by a national vote). The strike’s survival became more and more difficult to ensure. The logistics prevented the pickets from moving, as a growing number of miners, with heads hung low, returned to work.

The march on Brighton – to coincide with the TUC national congress at the beginning of September – shattered any illusions that the miners still held about the effectiveness of union solidarity. The strikers intended

to put pressure on the union leadership there, in order to call for a general strike. Unfortunately for them, they only found good intentions there, protected by a massive deployment of cops. Unions gave the excuse of the “political” nature of the strike to refuse any support, but it was obviously their own reasons that were political. If the miners hoped to overthrow Thatcher, they did not particularly think about reinstating the Labour party to power. They thought about their 1974 victory and planned the idea that if they overthrew the government, the next one could not go back on their word and would live up to their expectations. But both the unions and the Labour Party contented themselves with snivelling at crises, wherever they came from, and deplored the end of the “social peace”.

It was also at that time that Thatcher hurled her famous little sentence: “We had to face an external enemy in the Falklands. We also have to become aware of the enemy within, which is more dangerous to fight.” To complete the relentlessness, newspapers and TV channels, as if they were zealous police representatives, flew into a rage with the miners, casting all sorts of aspersions. Many miners would discover at that moment the true face of the media: the famous picture of Scargill, with outstretched arm, reminiscent of a fascist waving; tales about Gadaffi’s grants; the odd caption of “that beautiful black haired woman leading, in the night, wild hordes of commandos wearing paramilitary suits”; the insults and the scorn for whom the pickets were the target...And for good measure, the crying act of “the indescribable misery in which the miners lived”, the selfish and tedious repetition about their alleged confusion, their ever increasing humanitarian claims, and the commentaries on the strike reported, above all, according to the party’s official line...The

striking miners had more than one score to settle with the journalists: confiscating rolls of camera film, burning TV reporting vans, and the physical expulsion of tabloid press reporters became common practice.

Between September and October 1984, the return to work was accentuated, especially amongst those who did not attend the picket lines and stayed away from the fight: they constantly moaned about their family and financial problems, and were the first to crack. Others, in contrast, expressed their determination more violently. From then on, forced to block only their own pits, they regained momentarily the upper hand over the cops. However, they moved around far less, and direct communication between the strikers became more difficult. The NUM reinforced its intermediary role in the circulation of information between areas, and accentuated the isolation of strikers in reducing its logistical support.

Nevertheless, the miners were on home territory, each house was a refuge, and they took advantage of the active support from a big part of the population. During that autumn, the cops took their biggest hidings ever. For example, in Frickley (Yorkshire), where, taking advantage of the topography, people from the village waited in ambush, supplied with munitions by the kids who brought barrow-loads of bricks. The score: 42 injuries to 0 in the miners' favour. At Cortonwood, from 8th to 12th November, between 400 and 4000 people faced up to the mounted police because a miner dared to go back to work! There were many nights of simultaneous riots in most of the mining villages and numerous ambushes against the police convoys. On 12th November, a concerted attack on 25 Yorkshire pits left the cops completely powerless: police stations were attacked with Molotov cocktails, barricades were constructed and shops ransacked.

On the night of 30th November, near Merthyr Vale (South Wales), a concrete post was thrown from a bridge onto a taxi carrying a strike-breaker being escorted by the cops. The driver was killed. The NUM resolved immediately to ban picketing on the motorways. Thatcher declared: "I hope there will be a movement of mass return to work. This would be the external sign of the horror that the miners resent." She appealed to Neil Kinnock, leader of the Labour Party. Good coordination...He was already doing something about it: "The violence is not in control, nor in command, nor influenced by any one organisation. It's the action of individuals. And, I say to these individuals, wherever you are and whoever you are, the violence must stop..." And he asked for those responsible to surrender! The "external sign of the horror the miners resent", became known to Kinnock from as soon as 1st December, when attending a meeting in Stoke-on-Trent with Scargill. For half an hour, the miners insulted him with cries of "scab", "traitor" and "Judas". In the villages, and especially those in South Wales, the death of the taxi driver became one of the criteria which distinguished the real association from the suspicious. After some hesitation, many of them supported further action like the action of Merthyr Vale: on 3rd December, near Chesterfield (Derbyshire), an NCB van carrying mining explosives was lanced by steel bars thrown from a bridge. And from then on, a new slogan was cried to the scabs being escorted by the cops: "Take a taxi!"

However, the climate was becoming more and more favourable for the State. The fatigue of 10 months of striking was taking its toll. In addition to the debts which were accumulating, there was also police blackmail and the threats of redundancy for the thousands of

arrested strikers. Then, commando operations against the strikers began, with threats of death, aggression and cars being torched...At the same time, financed by right-wing groups, networks of lawyers encouraged the non-strikers to file for harassment against the NUM, draining even more on the strike funds and taking more and more of the strikers by the throat. In November, recognising the strikers' plight, the NCB proposed a £1,500 bonus to those who would return to work before the end of the year. Some took advantage only to go back on strike in January, but the return to work became more pronounced.

Likewise, a global process had been leading to pit closures, and an international reaction worked on breaking down the strike. Solidarity between states was stronger than the ideological cliques being represented by those in power.

As the stalinist Scargill had been one of the worst detractors of Solidarnosc and kept good relations with the bureaucrats of the east, Poland doubled its coal exports to the UK during the strike. The miners obviously didn't have the same bureaucratic affinities as Scargill: they ransacked the offices of the Polish economic delegation in Sheffield. The NUM was careful not to publicise the resolutions of solidarity by the miners of Mazow and Silesie, preferring a major promotional campaign of the French union, CGT (Confederation Generale du Travail) with fundraising and giving out childrens' toys for Christmas. However, the powerful CGT of the dockers constantly agreed to load the 'yellow' coal which was destined for England, the French National Coal Board (Charbonnages de France) even increased their exports. In Rouen, in total secrecy, the dockers from the CGT loaded Polish coal destined for England...



Garw Valley, South Wales, 1929: three walking scabs...



Houghton Main, Yorkshire, 1984: one driving scab...

In mid-January, Scargill thought the time was right to enter into negotiations without conditions. On 29th January, 3,000 South Yorkshire miners descended on the pit entrance of Cortonwood in order to attack the pigs with just one slogan; 'No surrender!' It was the first mass picket in two months and during that very evening negotiations broke down. Because of the threat of Notts withdrawing their support, the growing number of scabs and the freeze on assets, the NUM were keen to see a quick end to the strike: its monopoly of power was at stake. A negotiated solution, inevitably to the detriment of the miners, would result in the NUM losing all its credibility in the miners' eyes. The NUM acted in its own interests, using the current mood that existed to ensure that unity within the union was preserved. At the beginning of February, the South Wales branch of the NUM proposed the return to work "without negotiation and with dignity". The idea coming from this area, where there were fewer scabs, had general appeal, but above all, many miners didn't believe in the success of the strike anymore. The idea of returning together to work without suffering the humiliation of being dragged through negotiations – with the ulterior motive to seek revenge in the pits – was gaining ground and Scargill jumped on the idea... Because, for the most militant, there still remained the question of fighting until, at the very least, they had succeeded in imposing a general amnesty on the condemned and the reintegration of redundant workers.

On 28th February, the NCB announced triumphantly that half the miners had returned to work, a decisive threshold insofar as it legitimised a growing offensive of the state against what had become a minority movement. The government and the media went ballistic, accusing "the striking minority" of ruining the country. Thatcher called them "the new luddites"*, while her

analysts estimated the total cost of the strike (loss in production and taxes, upholding the law, fuel expenditure, etc.) at £3 billion, accounting for a 1% drop in GNP. A ballot of the NUM national executive on 17th February had called for the continuation of the strike; on the 4th March, the same executive decided to stop the movement with 98 votes against 91 in accordance with the methods of return as proposed by South Wales: return to work and then discuss the reintegration of the sacked workers. When, in London, Scargill announced the result of the vote, hundreds of cops separated the NUM leaders from the crowd of thousands of miners. The hatred erupted. Scargill himself was insulted and branded a scab. Other treacherous union members were only saved by the bobbies that came to their aid. With tears and anger, the miners left the scene whilst still protesting that they would never return to work.

After the vote on 4th March, it was from then on unacceptable for the NUM executive to be disobeyed. The return to work took the form of a spectacle of union brotherhood, marching bands and banners on display. The display of unionism raised their head in an obscene manner. However, many miners, gutted, didn't return to work; others walked out within five minutes of their return: "They treat us like shit". In the toughest areas, such an abdication was largely refused: Kent, Scotland and 3 Yorkshire pits voted on the evening of 5th March for the continuation of the strike until the general amnesty was agreed. From the very top and throughout the pit workforce, all the bastards in the NUM hierarchy pressed on with convincing the strong-minded to comply with the national decision.

Consensus within the NUM was far from total. Certain pits in Wales and Scotland reopened without ceremony: "We return with heads down, we are realists, there

is nothing to celebrate.” Many miners called in sick to avoid such a humiliation. Sometimes the reaction was more furious: McGahey was insulted and jostled on his return to Scotland when he announced the return to work, and a few days later, this notorious stalinist had his face smashed in. In many pits, the miners refused to return with the scabs and quarrelled with the cops. In total, about 20% of the miners were still not working during the first days of the return. The settling of old scores with the scabs began immediately. Although the NCB had taken precautions to protect them, there were many who paid with their own blood, in the showers, in the cages...In Bettleshanger (Kent), the besieged scabs had to barricade themselves in and call for help. In Wales, with their husbands in the mine, it was their wives who took revenge on the scabs. Almost everywhere their homes were torched. The scale of the vengeance reached such a level that those in Yorkshire were temporarily paid to stay at home. Most of them sought refuge in Notts: the ex-strikers made their lives hell.

During the first ten days of the return, the first pits earmarked by the NCB plan were closed, and ten thousand miners demanded their “voluntary redundancy”. But more than a defeat, it was the total destruction that the NCB and the state were looking for. A veritable strategy of humiliation was put in place, all the more effective because the NUM no longer held any control over the miners, and the demoralisation continued to spread. A series of agreements arising from previous battles were broken. Amongst many examples of victimisation, the NCB declassified some qualified miners and abolished bonuses, resulting in significant wage losses; many miners no longer received the coal they were entitled to; the slightest insult or recrimination resulted in disciplinary dismissal. At the same time, the cops took

revenge with a whole year of harassment, re-establishing order in the villages and imposing strict legal opening times for welfare clubs – like a return to the regular puritan curfew, so joyously flouted during the strike.

In this context, it was first the shock and disgust that prevailed: drunkenness became the norm, and the old feelings of resentment resurfaced. After a year of hectic life, the return to everyday life was unbearable. However, there were some reactions. The miners of Armthorpe went on strike for three days to warn the NCB that they were not prepared to suffer humiliation of that sort. But the numerous spontaneous actions remained isolated events and were contained within the local area. There were also numerous vengeful acts of sabotage such as, at the end of March, in Kiveton Park, where the underground telephone system and the cable of the pit cage were sabotaged (causing £1.5 million of damage). Everywhere, the production dropped dramatically despite threats from the NCB. In such an atmosphere of division, isolation and frustration, the NUM was only preoccupied with its internal problems: it worked desperately to re-establish a sense of unity. It called for a reintegration of the Notts branch, and reconciliation with the non-strikers who returned to work after Christmas: the strikers rejected this idea – a scab is a scab! In the end, on 3rd April, the NUM voted, amidst the miners' insults, to lift the overtime ban.

The birth of the Rank and File Movement (RFM), the only attempt aimed at reintegrating the redundant workers and the amnesty of prisoners, appealed to some miners amongst the most active. But if the RFM attempted to coordinate with the collectives of miners' wives and support groups, it proclaimed in its constitution its allegiance to the NUM and took care not to rock the boat.

In May, a wildcat strike started in South Kirby, Yorkshire, for the reintegration of two miners who had been sacked that very morning; it received the formal support of the local NUM, but without receiving any vehicles, petrol or cash! Thanks to the flying pickets, it succeeded in spreading to five other pits, but only lasted for a few days. The RFM provided financial support, albeit underhand; it missed the opportunity to make a public example of such support, proving that it was only a satellite of the NUM. The complete absence in the RFM newspaper of information on the sporadic strikes and acts of vengeance that took place after March confirmed that the RFM project was limited to neo-syndicalism.

Taking advantage of the exhaustion and desperation of the miners (who had already paid a heavy price: 13,000 arrests, followed by dozens of incarcerations, 11,000 hospitalisations and 11 deaths) and of their allies (deeply disappointed, the defeat of the miners led to numerous unions withdrawing their strike notice in the months that followed...), the state blew the mort. Thatcher, at the peak of her arrogance, proclaimed victory. Her government enacted a new law on public order: an increase in police powers, tightening of legislation on picketing, and political, union and sporting gatherings... The NCB closed many more pits on the pretext of the damage caused by the strikers: 40,000 jobs cut instead of the 20,000 announced in March 1984 (the decline continued: from 140,000 in 1985, the number of miners fell to 110,000 in 1987, and to 60,000 in 1989. In 2004, there were just 12 pits remaining...).

The miners of Notts voted with a strong majority to break away from the NUM, and they created the Union of Democratic Miners (UDM), recruiting also from

within other regions (in November 1985, delegates of the Notts branch of the NUM revealed that the NCB encouraged people to join the UDM in exchange for cars, improved pensions and salaries...). The NUM, for whom the strike had cost £4 million, was going to lose 40,000 members and £1.8 million per year in subscriptions. The congress of the TUC, in September 1985, was marked by a shift to the right, in much the same way as the Labour party at that time, which would eventually lead the UK to the reign of Tony Blair. Thatcher could, already, speak very highly of "new realism", which she congratulated the unions for. A "new style of industrial relations" commenced – much worse than in 1926.



16th March 1985, South Kirby: a tribute to miner David Jones, one year after he was killed while picketing in Ollerton.